

FIELD



FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

NUMBER 59

FALL 1998

OBERLIN COLLEGE PRESS

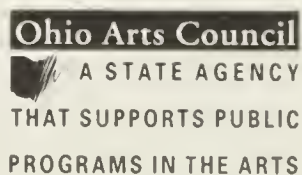
EDITORS *Pamela Alexander*
Martha Collins
Alberta Turner
David Walker
David Young

BUSINESS *Heather Smith*
MANAGER

EDITORIAL *Elizabeth Antalek*
ASSISTANTS *Ian Demsky*

DESIGN *Steve Farkas*

www.oberlin.edu/~ocpress



FIELD gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to *FIELD*, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Subscriptions \$14.00 a year/\$24.00 for two years/single issues \$7.00 postpaid. Back issues: \$12.00 each. Contact us about availability.

Copyright © 1998 by Oberlin College.
ISSN: 0015-0657

CONTENTS

	7	Sylvia Plath: A Symposium
<i>Pamela Alexander</i>	10	<i>"Black Rook in Rainy Weather": Tricks of Radiance</i>
<i>David Young</i>	16	<i>"Elm": Tree with an Attitude: Reading Plath Irreverently</i>
<i>Sandra M. Gilbert</i>	24	<i>"Berck-Plage": A Long Hiss of Distress: Plath's Elegy on the Beach at Berck</i>
<i>Dennis Schmitz</i>	39	<i>"The Arrival of the Bee Box": The Gift Poem</i>
<i>Jean Valentine</i>	44	<i>"Stings": Notes on Sylvia Plath</i>
<i>Carl Phillips</i>	51	<i>"Winter Trees": Vision in Control</i>
<i>Martha Collins</i>	58	<i>"Words": Words for the Rider</i>
	* * *	
<i>Jean Valentine</i>	64	<i>For a Woman Dead at Thirty (2)</i>
<i>Beckian Fritz Goldberg</i>	65	<i>Body of the Hour</i>
	66	<i>Summer Heats Like the Needle in its Chosen Skin</i>
	67	<i>Twentieth Century Children</i>
	68	<i>Twentieth Century Children (5): Blood Kissing</i>
<i>Juan Carlos Galeano</i>	69	<i>Anaconda</i>
	70	<i>Tree</i>
<i>Caitlin Scott</i>	71	<i>The Lizard Underneath</i>
<i>Kary Wayson</i>	72	<i>Bells</i>
<i>Marianne Boruch</i>	73	<i>Near Halloween</i>
	74	<i>The Way the Dying Hear Things</i>
<i>Steve Fay</i>	76	<i>Wild Harvests</i>
<i>Shirley Kaufman</i>	78	<i>Jump</i>

<i>Alice Friman</i>	79	<i>The Fall</i>
	81	<i>Lost in Space</i>
<i>Ioanna Carlsen</i>	83	<i>Infanta</i>
	84	<i>Stay Up With Me</i>
<i>Betsy Sholl</i>	85	<i>Backwash</i>
	87	<i>Sweeney at Prayer</i>
<i>Karen Donovan</i>	89	<i>The Return of Fugitive Red</i>
	90	<i>The Enthymeme in Perspective</i>
<i>Eric P. Elshtain</i>	92	<i>Finding Vaudeville</i>
	93	<i>Grandmother's</i>
<i>Karen Carcia</i>	94	<i>Elegy for Scott Living in NYC</i>
	95	<i>Succession</i>
<i>Rodney Gove Dennis</i>	97	<i>The House Across the Street</i>
	98	<i>Warehouse</i>
<i>Michele Bowman</i>	99	<i>Letter, Possibility</i>
<i>Gerald Majer</i>	102	<i>Johnny Hodges Deathbed Blues</i>
	103	<i>Coltrane's Flute</i>
<i>Robert Lee</i>	104	<i>By Ryan's Pond</i>
	105	<i>Stable</i>
	106	<i>The Grey Man's Dance</i>
<i>Sandor Csoori</i>	107	<i>Etching of a Small Town</i>
	108	<i>I, Too, Might Have Been</i>
<i>Barbara Lau</i>	109	<i>Nonsense</i>
	111	<i>Regarding Jean's Decision Not to Reconstruct Her Breasts</i>
<i>Heather Sellers</i>	113	<i>Deck of Cards</i>
<i>John Rybicki</i>	114	<i>Begin</i>
<i>Marcus Cafagña</i>	115	<i>Cuban Walk</i>
	116	<i>Testament</i>
<i>Anne Marie Macari</i>	117	<i>The Woods Behind the House</i>
	118	<i>Clare Views the Body of Francis</i>
<i>Reginald Shepherd</i>	120	<i>Shipwreck and Drift</i>

<i>Nancy Eimers</i>	122	<i>What Gets Done</i>
	124	<i>Lunar Eclipse</i>
<i>Dennis Schmitz</i>	125	<i>The Gregor Samsa Syndrome</i>
<i>Sandra M. Gilbert</i>	128	<i>Dark Blue</i>
	129	<i>Spoon</i>
	130	<i>Calvados</i>
	131	<i>Trunk</i>
	132	<i>Contributors</i>

SYLVIA PLATH

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

SYLVIA PLATH: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

“Who is Sylvia, what is she/That all our swains commend her?” Who indeed? The culture of gossip, which is inimical to the true spirit of poetry, has often seemed about to take full possession of Sylvia Plath and to dominate all the conversations about her work among readers, critics and journalists. The recent publication of Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, itself a form of high-class journalism which might have been subtitled “Scenes from a Marriage,” did nothing, obviously, to correct this situation.

But working poets know why Plath is an important moment in American poetry, important for them to know and acknowledge, and it has little or nothing to do with the life, the death, and the gossip. It is centered in the excellence and originality of the poems, which are made, as good poems always are, out of words and with craft and cunning.

The intention of this symposium, while it can’t hope to outshout the gossip-culture, is to offer an alternative discourse, a view of Plath that is centered in her achievement as a maker, that interrogates the poems for the details of their originality — in their approach to the image, to metaphor, to poetic form and rhetoric.

Plath’s originality is what it always is when good poems are written: a thinking with language, through language, that comes out into new places and forges new insights into the very largest questions of existence. That Plath wrote poems of that order and magnitude is what poets and readers need to celebrate and commemorate. The rest is comparatively trivial, and will eventually fade from view.

BLACK ROOK IN RAINY WEATHER

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then —
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

TRICKS OF RADIANCE

"Black Rook in Rainy Weather" was included in the American edition of *Crossing the Water*, the so-called "transitional poems" written after *The Colossus* and before *Ariel*. But "Black Rook" is one of the handful of poems in *Crossing the Water* that doesn't fit the category. Written in 1956, it satisfied Plath enough to be included in the English edition of *The Colossus* and was dropped from the American edition at the suggestion of the editor.

The Colossus has often been criticized as stilted; "Black Rook" is an exception in this respect as well. Poems written just before and just after it yield diction like "However the grandiloquent mind may scorn such poverty" and the outright Victorian sentence "She flung from a room/Still ringing with bruit of insults and dishonors." From the beginning it is apparent that the language of "Black Rook" is more natural: "On the stiff twig up there/Hunches a wet black rook. . . ." The poet has invested her energies elsewhere — in the quiet rhyme scheme that links each line to the corresponding lines of all the other stanzas (first lines rhyme with first, second with second, and so on) and in the rhetorical shape of the poem. Both are calculated to accumulate across the poem and to dawn on the reader gradually.

It is the shift in rhetoric that intrigues me. "I do not expect a miracle," the speaker says, and we accept the sober position without argument. In stanza 2 she then repeats the statement in more explicit negative terms: she will not experience her sight set on fire, nor perceive design, ceremony, or portent. It is the poem's open secret, its quiet excitement, that the speaker herself does not accept this and in fact maneuvers the poem into a slow about-face.

Stanza 3 moves away from plain language to a kind of hand-waving, ostensibly to keep the non-miracle intact. Already the speaker begins to undermine her original disillusioned stance. The choppy effect of the many commas, for instance, in "Although, I admit, I desire,/Occasionally, some backtalk" obscures the poem's sideslip, its quiet retreat. "Honestly" in "I can't honestly complain" is patently insincere, as it is in everyday speech. Here it is also a tonal flag, showing the speaker shifting from the straight-

forward to the ironic. By the end of stanza 4 we have arrived at the point of contradiction-by-qualification: I'd really settle for a small miracle, the speaker says, one arising from even the most "obtuse" of objects (the sky having been given up as "mute").

A second tell-tale phrase in stanza 5 is "at any rate" — again, an empty gesture in conversation, but here part of the design of irony.

A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent

. . . Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary. . . .

Love. That fatal word has been smuggled into the poem loaded with diminishments. The last item in a catalogue at the end of a sentence that runs across two and a half stanzas, it has already been devalued against a scale of miracles that "set the sight on fire" and by qualifiers such as "certain," "minor," "still," "obtuse," and "inconsequent." Nor is it love exactly but what "one might say" is love. The "saying" is central, since it puts the speaker in control — the source, in fact, of whatever love appears. This landscape, like many of Plath's, turns out to be more internal than external, more drama than description.

The speaker's response to the possibility of saying love is revealing: the dismissive "at any rate" is followed by "I now walk/Wary. . . ." While this gives the primary reading of her alertness for even a small, mundane miracle to welcome, the connotations of wariness as being on guard *against* inhabit the poem at a deeper level. The use of "one" rather than "I" and of the subjunctive "might" also points to a defensive distancing.

Stanza 6 provides a neat encapsulation of the shift I have described.

. . . I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up. . . .

All the terms of stanza 2 are now reversed: the speaker's sight is set on fire, she sees a pattern in feathers, the rook becomes both ceremony and portent. Despite all her protests, she *is* waiting for the miracle, and the rook is a sign that such a thing is possible in this world. The indirect course of the poem magnifies its effect on the reader, who experiences something like discovery.

The conversion of denial to its opposite in "Black Rook" occurs in a series of increments, like a large ship turning. A similar turn in Elizabeth Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast" is accomplished abruptly: "I know what I saw next. It was not a miracle." Perhaps miracles require such moves in the second half of the twentieth century.

The last stanza of "Black Rook," in which the tonal shift is recapitulated in the openly flimsy pivot of the word "if," has a sort of British tongue-in-cheek understatement to it, not typically Plath.

. . . Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles.

It brings to mind another poem, Philip Larkin's "Born Yesterday," which wishes ordinariness on a friend's newborn daughter rather than the difficulties of extreme talent or beauty — then qualifies the wish using a similarly sly "if":

In fact, may you be dull —
If that is what a skilled,
Vigilant, flexible,
Unemphasised, enthralled
Catching of happiness is called.

Although frequently anthologized, "Black Rook" is not representative of Plath's work. Its landscape is sketchy — merely "dull, ruinous" — not, as elsewhere ("Finisterre," "Blackberry-ing") concrete, the description served up with such energy that it sometimes overreaches into cleverness. The title and first three lines here are virtually all we get of scene, unusual for the author of, say, the bee sequence. And we don't normally think of a speaker in a Plath poem presenting herself with the diffidence of a Prufrock, but this one says she is "sceptical,/Yet politic; ignorant//Of whatever angel may choose to flare/Suddenly at my elbow."

"Black Rook" does, however, take on the territory of drama and intensity — where miracles can happen, and poems — and the uneasy reconciliation of such territory with that of everyday life. Indeed, the poem can be read as one in which the poet considers her own work and, by poem's end, yearns for the flash of inspiration. Reading it in this way invites comparison to another early piece, "Stillborn," which opens with the line "These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis." "Black Rook" is a far more satisfying poem. Not only does it avoid the self-pitying element of "Stillborn," but more importantly it has considerable richness of syntax, connotation, and symbol.

While the rook partakes of the beauty and vitality of the horse that gave "Ariel" its name, the speaker here admires from a distance. The rook's significance is expressed in a line break near the end of the poem: at the end of stanza 6 and the beginning of 7, the bird

. . .grant(s)

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality.

The shining rook provides "a brief respite from fear" — until the reader continues and discovers it is not fear that the speaker fears, but "total neutrality." Feeling, after all, even the most difficult states of feeling, is in Plath's work what is most to be desired.

ELM
for Ruth Fainlight

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.
How you lie and cry after it.
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly, it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches? —

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

TREE WITH AN ATTITUDE: READING PLATH IRREVERENTLY

One of the challenges of reading Sylvia Plath is the problem of detaching the individual poems from their assigned positions in the white-hot narrative of the life, the illness, the wrecked marriage, and the suicide. The separation is what we owe any poem in order to read it as a thing in itself and not just an illustration of some moment in an interesting and fated person's day, week, month, etc. We can invoke good old New Criticism here, or we can invoke the more recent questionings of authorship and its authorities that pundits like Barthes and Foucault have bequeathed us.

Yet in Plath's case, the difficulty of separating poem from poet, and from life, is oddly acute. Before one has read much of her work, one has tumbled into the gossip, into the tabloid flattening of her artistic accomplishment, and the poems have begun to line up as lurid illustrations, vivid diary entries, exhibits for the defense or the prosecution if she or her former husband, her mother and father, or anyone else, happens to be on trial.

Difficult as distinguishing the work from the life may be in her case, and even if doomed to intermittent failure, it's worthwhile as an emphatic reminder that the voice and details of a poem are never simply a record or a mirror of one individual's life and feelings, at least not if the poem is any good.

We've been through this before, of course. At the height of Yeats's late phase, someone mischievously proposed, in an early issue of *Furioso*, that his poems were really a collaboration, the joint production of a group of little old ladies in London. The real point was to let some air in between the person and the poetic construction, the "Yeats" in the poems, though if you look closely at his poems you can see that he puts the distance in himself, confessing everywhere to a sly and exaggerated artifice for which he is both apologetic and triumphant. Circus animals, high talk, Malachi Stilt-Jack, etc. Plath gives you hints of that kind too, though readers have been mighty obtuse, sometimes, about responding to them. Finding her poems playful or funny seems to disturb a sort of reverent hush that tends to surround them, but it is a liberating experience both for the reader and for the poem.

Since the self in a poem is always a construct for the occasion, whatever the pitch of rhetoric chosen to present it, Plath's constructed selves are never going to be clearly seen or understood until they are taken as such. By making the self monstrous, she parodies and demystifies it. When we realize that ego so completely swallows world in her work that they become indistinguishable, cancelling each other out, we can begin to enjoy the wonderfully grotesque and jumpy theater of the imagination she managed to create. The performance, with its caricatures of reality, outsize gestures and mythopoeic figures, should be fun at the same time that it is unsettling and disturbing. Halloween masks come to mind, and even slasher movies; we come for the thrills and we need to recognize the artifice and the conventions that make them possible.

I propose to illustrate this with "Elm," where we can profitably begin by inquiring about the speaker. The answer in this case is quite interesting: here we have a talking tree. Shades of Grimm and Lewis Carroll and Tolkien! Brushing the unusual choice of speaker aside as a mere distraction and eagerly diagnosing all sorts of writerly agony behind it is not what reading poetry is about. It's reductive and boring, and it blurs a useful distinction between nature and art. Let the tree talk, and be sure you try to listen.

If we've been reading around in Plath we've already encountered talking mushrooms (a nice little exercise in syllabics from the end of *The Colossus*, number 121 in *The Collected Poems*). There's a talking mirror, and even in the poems where a human speaker is in charge, there's a tendency for natural things to be animated and unruly: tulips are excitable, grasses unload their griefs and murmur of their humility, gorse flowers are "extravagant, like torture," and so forth. The natural world tends to be threatening, powerful and unusually expressive.

There is a sort of "overspeaker" here, who hears and quotes the tree, as we understand from "she says" in the first line. The presence of that speaker raises the possibility that Ms. Elm may not continue speaking throughout, that the mask drops or the quoting stops and we hear directly from the overspeaker, who

fades in with a monologue that matches the tree's. Many commentators cite the poem's close and discuss it as if it were spoken by Plath herself. But no quotation marks or significant shifts support this idea, so I take it as a primary fact of the poem that the tree speaks throughout, quoted faithfully by someone who can translate her to us, for us.

What does this tree have to say? We can relate her to her mythic ancestor in Eden; she's definitely a tree of knowledge. She boasts of that knowledge, contrasting herself with the listener/reporter, who suffers fear because he or she (we know the tree's gender, but not, strictly speaking, the reporter's) doesn't have the knowledge provided by the tap root. It's a situation with a potential for comfort: I know the bottom, let me reassure you about your fear of it. Instead, what's emphasized is the difference. Knowledge frees the tree from fear; lack of it distinguishes the human listener.

I ran across a book recently called *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*, and I can recall a vivid Denise Levertov poem called "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," but those are positive encounters and the trees are lyrical and benevolent; I can't think of another case where a tree has so much that is unpleasant to communicate. This elm really has her listener's number. She knows not only about the fear, but about some previous mental illness, some insomnia, some lovelessness. She knows that her presence and her self-sufficiency are something of a torment to her human neighbor, but she doesn't promise to change or desist. For the first five stanzas she mounts a kind of triumphant harangue that is based on all the ways in which she differs from weak, vulnerable, sleepless and inconsolable humans like the "you" she is addressing, like all of us. The sounds she makes, variously suggesting the sea, hooves galloping in the distance, and dripping poison, torment her listener and she delights in the fact. She's willing to go on all night, "Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf."

We're conscious, as we read, or ought to be, of the constructedness of all this. It's not just that trees don't talk. It's that they wouldn't be likely to have an *attitude* of the kind that this one seems to have. Here's where reading Plath a little less solemnly

should begin to pay off; there's more in the poem if you leave room for its grotesque playfulness. Positing a tree that tells you off might be a way to deal with your own tendencies to self-pity.

In the sixth stanza, however, things begin to shift a little. The tree starts to reveal some vulnerability of its own. Its overconfidence ebbs, and it begins to confess to some hard times: atrocity of sunsets, windstorms that dismember its branches, unwelcome contact with the moon, possession by the human antagonist's dreams. It has, after all, an inner life that torments it, as embodied in its inhabitant: it turns out that an owl lives in the tree, unsettlingly, hunting by night and perching by day, and the tree is helpless about harboring this occupant. Two stanzas, the tenth and eleventh, report this dilemma vividly.

In the final trio of stanzas, the tree turns out to have some serious perception problems:

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are these the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches? —

Its snaky acids kiss,
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

All the tree's former knowledge and confidence have evaporated. It can't handle clouds, it turns out, and as the poem ends it is confronting a medusa head (the owl's face? the moon's?), acknowledging a petrification of the will and a death by "isolate, slow faults." Trees are helpless in certain ways, of course, and they do die, usually rather gradually.

No wonder a reader may suspect that the mask has slipped off and that we are hearing directly from the human subject behind it. The face can be seen as the poet's own, among other

things, a dawning recognition that this poem is one more inadvertent self-portrait, mirror of her own awfulness. While I don't think that's the case, I readily acknowledge that Plath is using the tree's perspective to explore her own feelings and sufferings. Isolating that insight, however, has tempted commentators to make the poem an allegory of Plath's relation with her mother and her prophetic agony (she didn't know of it yet, at least not officially) at her husband's infidelity.

But it does more justice to Plath, and makes the poem much more interesting, if we stay with its rhetoric, its fable, its constructions, entertaining the elm as speaker throughout. Picture, if you need to, a human being wearing a large, grotesque tree mask, but picture also the entire piece spoken, or chanted, by that masked figure. You then have a drama in which a "tree" (a human representation of a tree, that is) goes from confident to shattered. Or you have one in which it is revealed that human attempts to speak for trees, to speak as trees, are doomed to reveal their inadequacy, their inevitable humanness. Or both.

At the heart of all this lies an insight into Plath's ambivalent response to nature. She is both alienated from it, profoundly so, and at one with it. The latter alignment associates her with "nature" poets and with "romantic" attitudes toward nature, e.g. identifying with trees and animals, speaking with, to, and for them, while the former cuts across it, criticizes and questions it, creating an exciting dialogue. We respond to it because we all experience some form of this ambivalence. These are our own conflicted feelings, grotesquely dramatized. If you reduce that sense of alienation from nature by calling it merely a symptom of her personal pathology, you diminish its meaning, along with her energy and artistry.

It is true that the poems deal so much in exaggeration and caricature that they constantly risk, and do not always avoid falling into, sheer ludicrousness (or mere psychopathology, if that is what you seek). But they are inspiring in their risks, exhilarating in the way they deliberately let themselves respond to nature while at cross purposes with it. And they are astonishing in their confidence and assertiveness. A friend wrote me recently that

"Plath is still a person, maybe even a poet, who is hard to like, though the poems themselves thrill." And entertain, I would add. Pretend that you can no more find Plath in her poems than you can find, say, John Ashbery in his, and you begin to get a fix on a way that you can read her without the drag of gossip and the drone of therapy. You can let the elm, so to speak, speak for itself.

Finally, let's note the way in which this poem is powered by the expertise of Plath's rhetoric. She developed toward the end a style of enormous confidence and assurance. It is based partly on a sense of precision; as a former student, Michael Clune, once noted (in an unpublished honors essay on Plath), the metaphors leave no room for argument or speculation. When the tree tells us that the moon is merciless and barren, having a scathing radiance, we accept the emphatic and assured manner and voice. In the world of this poem, that is what the moon is like; the case is closed. That means that the poems drive forward in great surges of confidence, often lunging suddenly into greater bursts of honesty and insight than we expected from them. We let them carry us, giddy with delight. That is what my friend meant by saying that they "thrill."

It is also what he meant by suggesting that you could easily dislike someone who handles you and the experience she has designed for you, with such effortless ease, cuffing you this way and that, leaving you shaken. When I come to the end of "Elm" I experience that giddiness that comes as the roller coaster car flattens out and slows down to a stop. And I laugh, as I was surely meant to. The last stanza is so garish, so gothic, so over-the-top, that any other reaction to it would seem to miss the point. Only if we are freed from our excessive preoccupations with the personal fate of the artist can we slide home to the fun and excess that this poem has in store for us each time we read it.

BERCK-PLAGE

(1)

This is the sea, then, this great abeyance.
How the sun's poultice draws on my inflammation.

Electrifyingly-colored sherbets, scooped from the freeze
By pale girls, travel the air in scorched hands.

Why is it so quiet, what are they hiding?
I have two legs, and I move smilingly.

A sandy damper kills the vibrations;
It stretches for miles, the shrunk voices

Waving and crutchless, half their old size.
The lines of the eye, scalded by these bald surfaces,

Boomerang like anchored elastics, hurting the owner.
Is it any wonder he puts on dark glasses?

Is it any wonder he affects a black cassock?
Here he comes now, among the mackerel gatherers

Who wall up their backs against him.
They are handling the black and green lozenges like the parts of
a body.

The sea, that crystallized these,
Creeps away, many-snaked, with a long hiss of distress.

(2)

This black boot has no mercy for anybody.
Why should it, it is the hearse of a dead foot,

The high, dead, toeless foot of this priest
Who plumbs the well of his book,

The bent print bulging before him like scenery.
Obscene bikinis hide in the dunes,

Breasts and hips a confectioner's sugar
Of little crystals, titillating the light,

While a green pool opens its eye,
Sick with what it has swallowed —

Limbs, images, shrieks. Behind the concrete bunkers
Two lovers unstick themselves.

O white sea-crockery,
What cupped sighs, what salt in the throat. . . .

And the onlooker, trembling,
Drawn like a long material

Through a still virulence,
And a weed, hairy as privates.

(3)

On the balconies of the hotel, things are glittering.
Things, things —

Tubular steel wheelchairs, aluminum crutches.
Such salt-sweetness. Why should I walk

Beyond the breakwater, spotty with barnacles?
I am not a nurse, white and attendant,

I am not a smile.

These children are after something, with hooks and cries,

And my heart too small to bandage their terrible faults.

This is the side of a man: his red ribs,

The nerves bursting like trees, and this is the surgeon:

One mirrory eye —

A facet of knowledge.

On a striped mattress in one room

An old man is vanishing.

There is no help in his weeping wife.

Where are the eye-stones, yellow and valuable,

And the tongue, sapphire of ash.

(4)

A wedding-cake face in a paper frill.

How superior he is now.

It is like possessing a saint.

The nurses in their wing-caps are no longer so beautiful;

They are browning, like touched gardenias.

The bed is rolled from the wall.

This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible.

Is he wearing pajamas or an evening suit

Under the glued sheet from which his powdery beak
Rises so whitely unbuffeted?

They propped his jaw with a book until it stiffened
And folded his hands, that were shaking: goodbye, goodbye.

Now the washed sheets fly in the sun,
The pillow cases are sweetening.

It is a blessing, it is a blessing:
The long coffin of soap-colored oak,

The curious bearers and the raw date
Engraving itself in silver with marvelous calm.

(5)

The gray sky lowers, the hills like a green sea
Run fold upon fold far off, concealing their hollows,

The hollows in which rock the thoughts of the wife —
Blunt, practical boats

Full of dresses and hats and china and married daughters.
In the parlor of the stone house

One curtain is flickering from the open window,
Flickering and pouring, a pitiful candle.

This is the tongue of the dead man: remember, remember.
How far he is now, his actions

Around him like livingroom furniture, like a décor.
As the pallors gather —

The pallors of hands and neighborly faces,
The elate pallors of flying iris.

They are flying off into nothing: remember us.
The empty benches of memory look over stones,

Marble façades with blue veins, and jelly-glassfuls of daffodils.
It is so beautiful up here: it is a stopping place.

(6)

The natural fatness of these lime leaves! —
Pollarded green balls, the trees march to church.

The voice of the priest, in thin air,
Meets the corpse at the gate,

Addressing it, while the hills roll the notes of the dead bell;
A glitter of wheat and crude earth.

What is the name of that color? —
Old blood of caked walls the sun heals,

Old blood of limb stumps, burnt hearts.
The widow with her black pocketbook and three daughters,

Necessary among the flowers,
Enfolds her face like fine linen,

Not to be spread again.
While a sky, wormy with put-by smiles,

Passes cloud after cloud.
And the bride flowers expend a freshness,

And the soul is a bride
In a still place, and the groom is red and forgetful, he is featureless.

(7)

Behind the glass of this car
The world purrs, shut-off and gentle.

And I am dark-suited and still, a member of the party,
Gliding up in low gear behind the cart.

And the priest is a vessel,
A tarred fabric, sorry and dull,

Following the coffin on its flowery cart like a beautiful woman,
A crest of breasts, eyelids and lips

Storming the hilltop.
Then, from the barred yard, the children

Smell the melt of shoe-blackening,
Their faces turning, wordless and slow,

Their eyes opening
On a wonderful thing —

Six round black hats in the grass and a lozenge of wood,
And a naked mouth, red and awkward.

For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma.
There is no hope, it is given up.

A LONG HISS OF DISTRESS:
PLATH'S ELEGY ON THE BEACH AT BERCK

*Berck est une station a la fois balneaire, familiale et
medicale climatique.*

Guide Michelin, Nord de la France,
Champagne, Ardennes (1980)

I still remember the curious, and indeed curiously chilling combination of bafflement and envy with which I read "Berck-Plage" when it first came out in a magazine — a British journal like *Granta* or *Encounter*, as I recall, though I'm not sure which. My bafflement was generated by my envy or maybe the other way around. I was both puzzled and piqued by what I understood was far beyond my writerly (and even readerly) grasp: a presiding tension that gave shape, depth, and mystery to the poem, a tension between coolly controlled formal precision, on the one hand, and on the other, enigmatically, almost mystically daring metaphorical leaps. The strangely sinister mackerel-gatherers "handling the black and green lozenges like the parts of a body" scared me, even though (or perhaps because?) I didn't understand why and how they mattered in this gravely elegiac work. I was inexplicably sickened by the riddle of the passing priest, with his "high, dead, toeless foot," by the "obscene bikinis" and the furtive lovers who weirdly "unstick themselves" behind "concrete bunkers," by the plight of the "onlooker, trembling," who is drawn "like a long material//Through a still virulence," and by the "weed, hairy as privates" that this cryptic observer confronts. As for the at first dying, then dead old man at the center of the piece, with his "wedding-cake face in a paper frill" and his lost "eye-stones, yellow and valuable," his useless "tongue, sapphire of ash," those prophetic anxieties that, like most aspiring poets, I carefully cultivated, made his meaning all too clear to me, though I had as yet faced few mortal losses in my own life.

I came across "Berck-Plage" in the early sixties — maybe

after Plath's death, maybe not — but I'd been following her career with fascination for nearly a decade, ever since I was transfixed by an unnerving story she published in the girls' magazine *Seventeen*, when she must have been little more than that age herself and I was still in my "pre-teens." Now, as I journeyed into my twenties, I was a barely published poet, a part-time graduate student, and a full-time mother of two — soon to be three — babies, living in Kew Gardens, Queens, and Byronically stalking apart in "joyless reverie" from the other mothers at the playground, whom I scorned for what I considered their bovine cheerfulness. Plath was just enough ahead of me — four or five years older, I gathered — so that I could be secretly competitive without being as overwhelmingly daunted by her achievements as I would be by those of an exact contemporary. That I too had been Guest Managing Editor of *Mademoiselle* (albeit five years after she was) during the triumphant "prize" month she later so devastatingly portrayed in *The Bell Jar* — that I'd indeed worked closely with Cyrillic Abels, the very "Jay Cee" of that novel — cemented what I considered an obscure bond between my own quotidian domesticity and the more glamorous life of this author strolling a European beach of which I'd never heard.

Until around the time I first read "Berck-Plage," however, I'd been disappointed by Plath's poems (which is to say, in all honesty, I'd been rather relieved by their apparent docility, their "good girl" decorum). Though I knew I myself might seem just the kind of dutiful young "wife/mother" produced like vanilla wafers by the cookie-cutter culture of mid-century America, I didn't want to be a "good girl" in poetry, even though I had no very clear idea how to stop being one. Of course, most of the Plath verses I'd been reading had been the relatively careful texts of *The Colossus*, rather than the great *Ariel* poems, which I was just beginning to read when I stumbled on "Berck-Plage." Looking back now on those baffled, envious, really quite astonishing reading experiences, I realize how lucky it was for me that I *could* "stumble" on the *Ariel* poems. In the early sixties, Plath's vehement last words swam randomly, haphazardly into my ken, and even when, later, I began seeking them out, knowing she had lost

her life (although not quite how or why) and eager to see what she had left behind, I remained for quite a while an innocent, if no longer a random, reader. None of her poems had yet been privileged over any other: she was not yet the figure of melodrama who became notorious as the “poetess” of “Daddy.” Rather, she was someone from a college cohort just a little ahead of my own who had suddenly written a number of unfathomably compelling poems (including “Daddy”) that kept emerging along with odd, unverifiable rumors about the circumstances of her death.

Compelling, compulsive, almost *compulsory* reading. That was the point about the poems themselves. Whatever their author’s story — and no one I knew could explain it to me, at least for a while — there were the poems. Scorching the page with a kind of fatality. Hissing through the page. Burning the paper. Weird. I had never seen anything like them, nor have I since. I even wrote, and eventually published, a poem of my own “Her Last Sickness” — whose title reflects my sense of a feverishly brilliant malady at play in these breakthrough finalities.

“Berck-Plage” wasn’t, to be sure, the most scorching of Plath’s late works. I’d reserve that adjective for (besides “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus”) “Fever 103,” “Getting There,” “Stings,” and a few others. But what I’ve called its “metaphoric leaps” had a disciplined dazzle that I sensed was rooted in something hectic, something that in lesser hands would be out of control. At the same time, control — as I noted earlier — was also crucial in the poem, which has a surprisingly dispassionate as well as somber tone, despite its speaker’s sometimes almost paranoid edginess (“Why is it so quiet, what are they hiding? . . . Obscene bikinis hide in the dunes. . . . These children are after something, with hooks and cries”). Indeed, studying the piece today, I begin to suspect that what I’m calling “control” or “discipline” is the flip side of a kind of madness, a narrative estrangement from disturbing subject matter that makes it possible for Plath the artist to fashion such material into a superb elegy that is both deeply moving and deeply skeptical. For “Berck-Plage” is, of course, an elegy, perhaps the finest one this often indefatigable mourner

ever produced, though the gravity of its lamentation has been overlooked in favor of the more conventionally confessional "family elegies" the writer addressed to her father.¹

Like so many strong elegies, "Berck-Plage" juxtaposes the world of the desirous flesh — "those dying generations at their song" — with the *timor mortis* that the very processes of generation inevitably beget. Carnal appetites flourish on Plath's beach, bordered by the sea, that "great abeyance" of the solid and known, but so does fear, in the person of the deathly Father, a priest who no doubt "plumbs the well of his book" to uncover the awful truth of ashes to ashes, dust to dust. For on this "sandy damper" that stretches for miles, the earth is quite literally the ground of a hospital where the "onlooker, trembling" observes the hosts of "Things, things —/Tubular steel wheelchairs, aluminum crutches" that have been amassed to stave off death, but where, nonetheless, a representative old man is inexorably "vanishing" on "a striped mattress in one room." His death in section 3, a little more than halfway through the seven-part poem, sets off the work's remaining (and its major) action: the laying out of his body ("They propped his jaw with a book until it stiffened/And folded his hands, that were shaking: goodbye, goodbye"), the problematic condolences of mourners ("It is a blessing, it is a blessing") as they confront the "long coffin of soap-colored oak . . . and the raw date/Engraving itself in silver with marvelous calm"); the rituals of wake and funeral ("the pallors gather —//The pallors of hands and neighborly faces, . . . while the hills roll the notes of the dead bell") and the final resolution of burial, attended by the poem's speaker, "dark-suited and still, a member of the party."

"A member of the party": that Plath, as it turned out, was literally one of the mourners who followed the coffin of her neighbor Percy Key to its "stopping place" in Devonshire powerfully testifies to the conscious craft with which she fashioned this apparently seamless work. For the old man who is said to "vanish" at the center of "Berck-Plage" (and presumably therefore at or near the "real" Berck-Plage) did not actually expire anywhere near the beach in northern France where the poem's protagonist

moves "smilingly" though she knows she is "not a smile" and fears her heart is "too small to bandage" the "terrible faults" of the children who are "after something, with hooks and cries." When I first read "Berck-Plage," of course, I knew as little about someone in Devon named Percy Key as I did about the town of Berck, on the shore of Picardy — which is to say I knew nothing of either. Instead, I assumed that the episode the poem purports to represent was a single coherent event that took place at a seaside hospital in France or Belgium. Nor did I learn the "truth" about the work's sources until decades later when Ted Hughes explained that "Berck-Plage" is a beach in Normandy "which SP visited in June 1961" and where "there was a large hospital for mutilated war veterans and accident victims — who took their exercise along the sands." Added Hughes, the "funeral in the poem is that of Percy Key [an elderly neighbor] who died in June 1962, exactly a year after her visit to Berck-Plage."² Later still, I discovered in the old Green Michelin that has provided me with an epigraph here what Hughes himself evidently didn't realize (and what explains the importunate children with "hooks and cries"): that Berck, with its "immense plage de sable fin, tres sure," is "mondialement connu pour le traitement des malades osseuse, specialement chez les enfants," but that "ces affections, y compris la tuberculose osseuse, ne sont pas contagieuses, aussi les malades peuvent-ils mener une vie sociale normale."³

Although over the years I've examined a number of the Plath materials held at the Smith College Rare Book Room and Indiana University's Lilly Library, I don't remember ever looking at drafts of "Berck-Plage." It seems likely, however, that surviving pages might show the poem starting with jottings on the beach at Berck — jottings that mingled observations "balneaire" ("Electrifyingly colored sherbets" floating above the long "sandy damper"), "familiale" (bikinis, children, "white sea crockery") and "medicale" (wheelchairs, crutches, "a green pool . . . Sick with what it has swallowed," and even a priest whose black boot "is the hearse of a dead foot" not unlike the gangrenous foot of that bastard "Daddy").⁴ Whether or not my conjecture is right, however, the work's genius is evident in the skill with which Plath brought

such real or hypothetical "balneare, familiare et medicale" notations to bear on the elegiac tradition in which she undertook to compose a work memorializing the death of her octogenarian neighbor, Percy Key. For as in T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," in which the "whole earth is our hospital/ Endowed by the ruined millionaire," the sanatoria at Berck-Plage become monitory establishments, with each crutch and wheelchair a *memento mori* meant to warn all alike — sick or well, consumers of sherbets or wearers of obscene bikinis, mackerel gatherers or trembling onlookers — that priestly death comes always and inexorably closer with his "black boot [that] has no mercy for anybody."

To be sure, from the early "Morning in the Hospital Solarium" to the late "Tulips," "In Plaster," "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," and "Paralytic," hospitals had long had special significance for Plath, who also fictionalized medical scenes in such prose writings as "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" and *The Bell Jar*. Perhaps, however, the sheer strangeness of the beach at Berck — both its foreignness and its uncanny juxtapositions of jovial holiday-making and sorrowful cure-taking, of, that is, the "balneare, familiare et medicale" — fosters the tone of solemn estrangement that governs the piece from the start. Certainly such distancing is apropos, like muffled drums, in the presence of death, but this beautifully crafted elegy has, throughout, a firmness of defamiliarization that seems singularly suited to the "immense plage de sable fin, tres sure" on which it is so resonantly set.

The aesthetic processes that shape such defamiliarization are, moreover, strikingly ironic. On the one hand, as priestly death stalks the living, human beings are disassembled into fragments of themselves, with the "toeless foot" of doom drawing ever nearer to the "shrunk voices//Waving and crutchless" of the bathers and to the "confectioner's sugar" of breasts and hips hidden in the dunes, while the "green pool" sick from swallowing "limbs, images, shrieks" and the "weed, hairy as privates" prefigure the "red ribs" and "mirrory" surgical eye that will soon appear, along with the "eye-stones" and tongue of the dead man, the pallid "hands and neighborly faces" of mourners, and the crusted "blood of limb stumps" evoked by the red earth of the graveyard. On the

other hand, as the living disintegrate into body parts, inhuman objects ("Things, things") take on an almost surrealistically autonomous existence: "Electrifyingly-colored sherbets . . . travel the air in scorched hands" as if of their own volition; "washed sheets fly in the sun"; the "raw date" of the old man's death engraves "itself with marvelous calm." Finally, indeed, the thoughts of his widow are "Blunt practical boats//Full of dresses and hats and china and married daughters," as if there were no distinction between people and possessions, and the "actions" of the dead man have solidified "like livingroom furniture, like a decor," while the trees with serene composure "march to church."

Such processes of distancing and estrangement set the scene with extraordinary effectiveness for the climactic moment of "Berck-Plage" — the moment when the "naked mouth" of earth opens, "red and awkward," to swallow the coffin of the dead man, who turns out to have been one Percy Key but obviously signifies Everyman. I don't think I noticed, when I was first seized by the austere ferocity of this elegy, how carefully — how theologically! — Plath prepares for such a denouement, from the very beginning of the work dressing death in the black cassock of a priest and juxtaposing his affectation of piety with the cryptic (and perhaps desperate) ritual of the mackerel-gatherers, who "wall up their backs against him" to handle "the black and green lozenges [of fish] like the parts of a body." But if only unconsciously I must have been gripped by the fatality with which the sacramental "lozenges" of dead mackerel dissolve into the distanced and defamiliarized "lozenge of wood" in which the body parts of the dead man have been secreted. And I must have at least intuited, too, the bitter skepticism that shaped the transformation of priestly death (from the poem's beginning) into, at the end, a hopeless human priest who is merely a "tarred fabric, sorry" — in several senses — and "dull," though he presides dutifully over the ceremonial futility with which the "coffin on its flowery cart like a beautiful woman,/A crest of breasts, eyelids and lips" (echoing the obscenely titillating breasts and hips of section 2) storms the hilltop graveyard.

Nor did I quite appreciate, I'm sure, the brilliance with which

Plath assigns the poem's final vision to a group of children in a "barred yard" — children who in their representation of mortal innocence and fleshly entrapment surely share with the children in section 3 the "terrible faults" the speaker cannot "bandage." From their (ironically) naive perspective, the last communion in which the earth must swallow a eucharistic "lozenge of wood" is a "wonderful thing." But the speaker — and I believe I trusted her, even though I was a "twenty-something" baffled and envious would-be competitor — knows better. Though "the sky pours into the hole" in the graveyard "like plasma," she concludes, "there is no hope, it is given up." And "it" here has of course multivalent references. Most obviously "it" is the lozenge/coffin that must be "given up" to the voracious earth mouth. But, too, "it" is hope for some ritual of redemption from the "sorry and dull" human priest. And "it" is even the sky, which only pours *like* plasma but can neither resuscitate the dead one nor offer him and his mourners the promise of a heavenly home.

Whether sacrifice or surrender, says this classic mid-century elegy, giving up is what one does in the face of death. Yet at the same time the circumstances of defeat must be scrupulously recorded and set against the oncoming priest of the grave — the living must "wall up their backs against" his "black cassock" and his "high, dead, toeless foot" as the mackerel gatherers do — even if the details out of which they build their defenses are as nauseating as the "Limbs, images, shrieks" that have sickened the eye of the innocent green pool among the dunes. In this respect, I think even my earliest readings of "Berck-Plage" prepared me for at least a few arguments I might now want to make about late twentieth-century public as well as private procedures for mourning and perhaps, more generally, about the theological "damper" on which our aesthetic now locates itself. To be sure, the skeptical resignation with which Plath gives "it" (the coffin, hope, the sky) up at the end of her bleak elegy is hardly unprecedented. The "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith" had been heard by Matthew Arnold, among others, more than a century earlier. But the Channel dividing Berck-Plage from Dover Beach is obviously even more historical than geographical.

On "the French coast the light/Gleams and is gone," mourned Arnold, but he insisted that "the cliffs of England stand,/Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay" and imagined that there might still after all be something substantive to fight about, even if the battle was joined by "ignorant armies" who clash by night. For Plath, though, the sea that primordially "crystallized" body parts, limbs, images, shrieks, simply "Creeps away, many-snaked, with a long hiss of distress." I suspect it was that long, that devastating and devastated hiss of distress I found so eerily compelling in "Berck-Plage" almost, now, four decades ago.

NOTES

1. For a fine and influential discussion of the "American family elegy" see Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
2. I am quoting Hughes' footnote to "Berck-Plage" in Plath's *Collected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), but he also offered much the same explanation of the poem's origins in "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 187-95.
3. *Guide de Tourisme: Michelin, Nord de la France, Champagne, Ardennes* (Paris: Pneu Michelin, 1980), p. 57. Interestingly, the *Michelin Guide* goes on to note that this "centre de cure" which in 1980 consisted of six establishments with three thousand beds among them "est ne du devouement d'une humble femme, Marianne Brillard, dite Marianne 'toute seule' parce qu'elle avait perdu son mari et ses quatre enfants, qui recevait, vers 1850, les petits soffreteux, malingres ou scrofuleux" (57). The benevolence and devotion of the long-suffering Marianne contrasts dramatically with the insistence of Plath's speaker that "I am not a nurse, white and attendant" as well as with her assertion that her own "heart [is] too small to bandage [the] terrible faults" of the children who seem to be following her "with hooks and cries."
4. Jack Folsom, of Montana State University, has published on the Internet an essay discussing death and rebirth in "Berck-Plage," which also offers some information on the variant drafts that are evidently held at Smith but though he studies evolving versions of the poem he doesn't indicate whether the Berck-Plage passages seem to have begun earlier (or separately) than the Percy Key material.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BEE BOX

I ordered this, this clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can't keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.
It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.

THE GIFT POEM

In the bee poems from *Ariel*, the images of a woman setting free the contradictory powers inside her are so familiar that they've become the currency of reference in the Plath industry. If you read "The Arrival of the Bee Box" in the context of the cycle, it's easy to perceive Plath's anger at Ted Hughes over their very recent separation, and her conflict between the demands of motherhood and the demands of poetry. But in the poem itself, the personal references aren't as studied.

The bee box may be an image of self-control to be challenged. Though it seems to threaten as a "coffin," it also can be a version of the speaker herself — pregnant? In any case, there is a dark mystery inside. The "moon suit" is another restriction; it incapacitates as it insulates the wearer. The speaker may have "ordered" the circumstances but not the consequences of her situation.

Plath's strategies changed in each of the five poems. She wrote all of them in the same week in 1962, moving images and passages around as you will when you discover that you're writing a sequence of poems, that you're only the agent of the process in a particularly fertile period of composition. What are apparently first drafts of the poems were hand-written on the backs of mostly consecutively-numbered pages of a typed draft of *The Bell Jar* (working from the end of the book manuscript forward), so the development of the poems is clear. "The Bee Meeting," the first in the series, uses long lines with cumulative sentences and interrupting questions that identify new elements in the situation as the speaker comes to awareness — the pace is hesitant, dread finally overpowering the apparently artless curiosity. "Stings," the most complex of the series, required extended re-articulation.

"The Arrival of the Bee Box" feels different, and in fact required few changes from the first draft. It seems to be the "gift" poem — that is, the poem in a sequence that almost composes itself, is delivered whole with all its fingers and toes counted. Very often, the "gift" poem may be shorter than others in the series. It will derive its focus from a central image or concept (the bee box);

it will be in scale and terse, shorter and maybe clearer than its companion poems. The writer may struggle with the other poems in the group. The “gift” poem is a reward — it may come in a rush because you have argued so with the previous poem, or because a good deal of draftwork has clarified terms and images for the series.

“The Arrival of the Bee Box” is set off, a kind of aside, with the feeling of self-satisfaction that an aside often has. The last line, “The box is only temporary,” may be menacing (it’s set off, a line by itself), or a puzzled conclusion. The delivery is brisk, though its matter-of-factness barely covers uneasiness. The simple declarative sentences of the first three-fourths of the poem and the end-stopped stanzas make it seem measured, deliberate and spare. That makes the poem scarier. The speaker is not in control — though later she pretends to be: “They can be sent back. / They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.” The commas suggest lack of control; she overstates cause-effect in the build-up of short sentences. But maybe she is the “owner” if she paradoxically surrenders to the thing itself — she’s fascinated (the turning point of the poem): “I wonder how hungry they are.”

If the rule-of-thumb for entering a poem is orientation first, “The Arrival of the Bee Box” begins well by showing a bee box and by the speaker admitting responsibility, perhaps chagrin. The “din” wants to be noticed. You could read the poem as a discussion of the control over meaninglessness that language provides; the poet translates feelings, redirects rage. In the other poems in the series, the speaker threatens figures of her betraying lover, turns rage against herself because she can’t turn it on their children, Medea or not. I’m not sure whether the purpose of the set-up here is to show how the speaker is led to assent to her condition by closer examination of the bee box, or whether the poem is in fact a demonstration poem in the form of an aside, its purpose to lead readers to a revelation of the speaker’s true designs.

The end-stopped stanzas are boxy. Transitions tell you where you are by telling you what to do: put your eye to the grid, put your ear to the noise of the menace inside. A stanza will end by

setting up the directions for the stanza following: "There is only a little grid, no exit" and "It is like a Roman mob,/ Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!" You can't leave the situation; you must get closer, at the level of the box itself. You want to put yourself in danger. The directions you give yourself are inevitable steps in the ritual of assent, the self-abasement for the sake of power which proceeds from the initial acceptance of the box itself. Plath argues her inability to retreat by arguing the overwhelming potency of the bees. She wants to be controlled by the bees. The earlier comment, "How can I let them out," certainly can be read two ways. She teases herself by saying "If I just undid the locks. . . ."

Sylvia Plath's personal life is implied in her poems the way patterns of personal behavior are implied in any writer's work. Talk of this sort is useful but reductive. Plath was thirty years old and in a rush for everything, as thirty-year-olds are. She began writing the poems of her maturity at the same age most poets do, and maybe she didn't finish all of them. That the poems are better than the poems of most poets at any age may be in part because she fretted so much over earlier poems and over her personal pain. Maybe pain made her lucky — whoever deserves or earns a poem? It is enough that in these poems she welcomed all the things that scared her and practiced the art that could rescue that part of herself she wanted rescued.

STINGS

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
The man in white smiles, bare-handed,
Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet,
The throats of our wrists brave lilies.
He and I

Have a thousand clean cells between us,
Eight combs of yellow cups,
And the hive itself a teacup,
White with pink flowers on it,
With excessive love I enameled it

Thinking 'Sweetness, sweetness'.
Brood cells gray as the fossils of shells
Terrify me, they seem so old.
What am I buying, wormy mahogany?
Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush —
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.
I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

It is almost over.
I am in control
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin

To scour the creaming crests
As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.
A third person is watching.
He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.
Now he is gone

In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.
Here is his slipper, here is another,
And here the square of white linen
He wore instead of a hat.
He was sweet,

The sweat of his efforts a rain
Tugging the world to fruit.
The bees found him out,
Molding onto his lips like lies,
Complicating his features.

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her —
The mausoleum, the wax house.

NOTES ON SYLVIA PLATH

The woman in the attic, the voice underneath, subverting the normal, the alter self that has to be killed by her own mad hand — this woman whose spirit, whose sexuality and whose truth are so subversive that she is locked away, burned (whose work is lost, burned), buried, century after century, called foreign and doomed and mad: Sylvia Plath led her down the stairs and tried to live with her, with every breath of what Carol Muske calls her “zero-at-the-bone, high speed wind of genius.” Sometimes she found her self threatening; but she never locked her self away, until the last day.

*

The locked away self is what we had in poetry as well as generally, when I came of age in the 50s. In college the contemporary poetry we studied was remote — Yeats, Frost, Eliot, Stevens; on the side we read Dickinson, Moore and Bishop. No woman I knew of had written poetry and married and had children; there was no known love life.

When I saw the first of the *Ariel* poems in print, in 1963, I sat down and rewrote my whole first manuscript. It went much deeper than “influence.” I was woken up, brought to life. I think many women were. I hadn’t heard language as alive as that since Dickinson; and, as with Dickinson, to say “language” is misleading: the language is that alive because it *is* the spirit. It is not *about* the spirit; it doesn’t serve, or describe, it becomes the truth.

And this was in my own time. Here was a woman my age, married, with kids — and dead by suicide. I felt the charge of her energy and consciousness and depth; and it was not only that it was new in its moment: to this day, her lines make the hair go up on the back of my neck. Lines like these, from “Stings”:

I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.
And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.

*

In 1963, and for years before and years after, I was also suffering from depression, sometimes suicidal. I had two young children — Plath's death and later Sexton's, as well as the deep self-destruction among many writers besides myself, filled me with fear. Fear of poetry. In 1970 I was lucky in a way that Plath was not: I found a therapist who gradually brought me to believe that poetry was the strongest healing power in my life. My lifeline. You write, he said, every day, including Christmas. I still have a piece of paper he gave me, a prescription: Work, work, work. He signed it Cotton Mather.

I often think, What if Plath had found such help. Not because she feared poetry or needed to be persuaded that it *was* her life — but what if she had found, been able to receive, that kind of unconditional love. Love teaches us to love.

I always thirst for what she would have been writing all these years.

*

What makes the difference between the subversively unconventional, even revolutionary, and the despairing soul? Dickinson seemed to choose her refusals and promises, and survive them — did she flourish in them? — happy are those who can. For Plath the possibilities for social experience were wider; what her inner possibilities were is a mystery.

*

It is fearful to see the World that sometimes met, and meets, Plath's work. See Robert Lowell's Foreword to the U.S. edition of *Ariel* in 1966, in which he states that her art cost Plath her life:

Suicide, father-hatred, self-loathing — nothing is too much for the macabre gaiety of her control. Yet it is too much; her art's immortality is life's disintegration.

I would disagree: I would imagine that her art was her lifeline for as long as her life lasted.

But if your art costs you your life, beware, poet: there is a curse lying under Lowell's imperious judgment; it plays and replays throughout his Foreword, and it plays and replays elsewhere. See Richard Wilbur's dismissive

. . . Sylvia who, condemned to live,
Shall study for a decade, as she must,
To state at last her brilliant negative
In poems free and helpless and unjust.

— "Cottage Street, 1953"

And this year, Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*. See "Apprehensions":

Your writing was also your fear,
At times it was your terror, that all
Your wedding presents, your dreams, your husband
Would be taken from you
By the terror's goblins.
. . . [Fear] hid in your Schaeffer pen —
That was its favourite place. Whenever you wrote
You would stop, mid-word,
To look at it more closely, black, fat,
Between your fingers —
The swelling terror that would any moment
Suddenly burst out and take from you
Your husband, your children, your body, your life.
You could see it, there, in your pen.
Somebody took that too.

Whose fear?

*

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill speaks of growing up in the 60s in the literary tradition of Irish:

The very concept of a woman being a poet was inherently threatening, as witnessed by the extreme hostility that surrounds the subject. I was brought up amid a welter of proverbs and formulaic phrases of the likes of

The three worst curses that could befall a village:
a wet thatcher (who lets the rain in)
a heavy sower (who broadcasts seeds too densely)
a woman poet (no reason given; none needed)

There was a widespread belief that if poetry, which was a hereditary gift . . . fell into the female line, then it was gone from that particular family for seven generations to come.

*

Plath's truth: there is a deep change happening in our world, happening, among other places, in the body, mind and spirit of women. When there is this depth of change threatening — as there is now — the bearer of truth is sometimes called insane. (Last night, after working on this piece, I dreamed: *Save the goat of humanity.*) Sylvia Plath was a poet searching intuitively, spiritually, for a new existence — trying to stay a woman, and become a spirit. If she was not a woman, what was she? If she was a woman, what was she? She knew her own genius. She knew she was "outsize" — a Gulliver — outside — yet at the core of things.

*

The most understanding essay I've read about Sylvia Plath is Patricia Hampl's "The Smile of Accomplishment: Sylvia Plath's Ambition." Hampl sees Plath as a woman poet not on a literary quest, but a spiritual one; as a poet who went beyond autobiography to myth. She compares Plath's work to Simone Weil's, talking especially about Weil's study of affliction, and how affliction changed both these women's lives.

Hampl sees Plath's last poems as evidence of an "imperfectly imagined transformation." She argues forcibly that Plath's will was not surrendered — a surrender classically necessary for spir-

itual transformation. She sees Plath at the end therefore as tragically stuck, unable to move. Acknowledging Plath's "loyalty to her desperation," she goes on:

And for women certainly there will always be the grave sense of history having been made in the *Ariel* poems; here, finally, the ancient struggle is described in female terms, the beast of living wrestled down to the mat by a woman, fiercely employing her — our — images in terrible, contorted holds until the effort failed, and the light went elsewhere.

"The ancient struggle" — I don't think it was a struggle described in different (female) terms, but an ontologically different struggle.

Was it Plath who was stuck? Or was it creation? Life for Plath, as it was for Keats, was soul-making. In soul-making there are many moments of being stuck. Like in childbirth.

I think, to the end, she was never stuck for long — sometimes she was writing about being stuck. Exhausted. So long as she was writing about being exhausted, she was not exhausted. The act of writing is an act of hope.

I don't believe she failed. In spite of her tragic death. And I believe life is always more important than art. If these things can be separated, and weighed. It is a paradox: it is of the spirit.

*

Some poetry, including certainly Plath's, is like the work of the contemplative, not only bearing witness to change in this world, but bringing it about. As William Johnston says in his introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "No corner of the universe is untouched by this exercise of love . . . fresh impulse is given to the thrust of consciousness. . . ."

Plath's lifework gave fresh impulse to the thrust of consciousness.

The last transformation: her words — well beyond her own story — were already adding light to our world, like a star, before anyone saw them. The light was on its way to us.

WINTER TREES

The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve.
On their blotter of fog the trees
Seem a botanical drawing —
Memories growing, ring on ring,
A series of weddings.

Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery,
Truer than women,
They seed so effortlessly!
Tasting the winds, that are footless,
Waist-deep in history —

Full of wings, otherworldliness.
In this, they are Ledas.
O mother of leaves and sweetness
Who are these pietàs?
The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing.

VISION IN CONTROL

I am not sure that many readers of Plath — poets, scholars, or “civilians”— think of control when considering her work. This has everything to do with 1) a willful resistance to reading Plath as a writer of control, because to view the work as the product of an unfocused, troubled mind makes it easier to turn away from the difficult truths she would have us see clearly; and 2) the fact that it has become impossible *not* to consider the life when considering the work, and the easier task (because increasingly more natural in a tabloid culture that makes the so-called Confessional poets look downright demure) is to voyeuristically dwell on the already-exposed life rather than apply to the poems the critical scrutiny they deserve and — like all art that is lasting — will sustain. Much of the problem lies in the ambiguous position — a kind of junior membership — of women in the academy, in Plath’s time and, sadly, undeniably, in ours. We can see this, for example, in the reaction to this year’s *Birthday Letters*, which only purports to be another version of the Plath-Hughes story, but which has quickly been brandished by reviewers (male, mostly) as the *correct* version of the story, confirming the image (that at last had begun to erode somewhat) of Plath as an hysteric, a reactionary, a hater of men who too greedily craved the successes reserved for men.

The work that is lasting (in any poet) is that which not only survives the writer but survives the cultural memory of the writer’s life — it is significant, the time required for literature to reach a distance that renders the writer of the literature more historical, and less referential to our own era. Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare have attained this; Dickinson and Whitman have not — no American writer has, the literary culture is still too new. If we have yet to be able to read Dickinson without (somewhere in our minds) remembering white dresses, recipes for bread, refusals to descend the stairs for a gentleman-caller, then we are not likely to be able to avoid, in Plath, the memory of a disturbed psychology, a disturbed life (from childhood, to — and through — marriage) that ended in suicide. This need not prevent us.

though, from reading the work fairly — which means assuming that it exhibits control, and giving it the opportunity to prove this. It is my sense that in any artist, including those who are suicidal, it is never the *artist* who wishes to die. If anything, art becomes one of the few safe spaces for the artist, and will often prove to exhibit a control that is nowhere apparent or findable in the life. Another word for this control is vision, and it is evident in all great (or genuine, as Marianne Moore would say) writing. Plath is no exception.

Vision is not *merely* control, however. We see this in many of the poems of *The Colossus*, where an overly-exacting attention to meter and rhyme often either hamstrings the poems or makes them reminiscent of school figures in skating or of musical scales, the point of which is less artistry than dexterity. Consider, for example, "Man in Black." Not a bad poem, but a poem whose success, for me, rests primarily on its ability to "pull off" the feat of being a single, coherent sentence stretched across seven stanzas, all of which are cast in pure syllabics and in *terza rima*. (If "Mushrooms" is an exception, this is largely due to its subject matter, which concerns the building urgency of controlling what, unchecked, threatens to overwhelm; shackles, rhetorically speaking, are in this instance very much called for.) It is the common predicament: how to write formally without seeming to, and yet seeming to enough, so that one's mastery of craft is evident to the reader/listener?

Plath never lost interest in formal issues, even in her freest work. What appears to happen in the later poems is a relaxation of formal control. In fact, though, this isn't relaxation so much as it is the confidence of a writer for whom formal issues have at last become reflex; and with this fluency comes the ability to work more sophisticatedly — which is to say, with greater subtlety (this need not — and does not — compromise the content of the poem, which is rarely subtle). The other area of control is that of imagery. This isn't always in evidence; too often, there is too much that seems gratuitous, self-indulgent: "Cut" comes to mind, as does "Fever 103." To understand the difference, we have only to compare these with a poem like "Morning Song," in which a

smaller set of images is kept to, each image being given the space — one tercet each, precisely — in which to develop fully; or like “You’re,” whose context of mingled play and celebration actually requires an over-density of images, reflecting the giddy indecisiveness of a speaker who would name her never-quite-nameable joy. When this figurative control works in tandem with formal control in Plath, the poems are indeed wondrous. “Winter Trees” is only one of many available examples.

Suggestive of a kind of daydreaming or randomness of thought — perhaps that of a waking speaker? — the poem proceeds associatively but never loosely or unfollowably: having started at the reasonable equation of the dawn’s darkness and damp with the damp and dark of ink, it quite naturally follows that fog be the equivalent of the blotter on which, in ink, some hand has drawn a stand of trees — and a drawing of trees is indeed a botanical drawing, of sorts. Here, the dash cues us; it’s here that Plath then thinks of a *particular* sort of botanical drawing, the sort which shows the tree cross-sectionally — making visible, inside the trunk, the concentric rings by which the tree’s age can be determined. The first rhyme of the poem begins at this point, and is maintained for three consecutive lines (“drawing,” “ring,” “weddings” — and, internally, “growing”), on purpose; for this is the point at which the speaker moves from seeming randomness of subject toward a focus on what will become the one subject. The rings of trees speak to the trees’ age, age implies memories — no, that’s not quite it; the concentricity of the rings, “ring on ring” — a ring on a finger, which equals a wedding — “ring on ring,” a *series* of weddings (even as the rhyme makes these three lines of the stanza a series, separate from the rest of the stanza). The stanza seems to *find its way* into structure, toward a rhyme that is then lingered on, as the poem and speaker of it find their way toward their subject, linger as the focus is narrowed and, having found the subject — no less, it turns out, than the place of women as they have been viewed throughout civilization — are launched into the next stanza.

Not coincidentally, as stanza two brings the subject into greater clarity, there is an increase of regularity in terms of

rhyme: the somewhat stuttering, halting rhyme of stanza one (*abccc*) shifts to what the first three lines of stanza two lead us to think will be *abab*, with various possibilities for the final line. Instead, we get *aba*, then two lines that do and don't rhyme as we might expect. "Footless" doesn't rhyme with "women," but it isn't quite the rhyme of "effortlessly," either — which, however, *contains*, but finally withholds the rhyme for "footless." And while "history" is a rhyme for "bitchery," it also bears the same half-relationship to "effortlessly" that "footless" does. All of which is to say that rhyme is in effect here, but it is unstable or, at best, fluid. As with stanza one, this is deliberate, an example of Plath's ability to control the poem, carefully calibrating the relationship between form and content. For it is in this stanza that, in turning to the subject of women, she would like to destabilize what would seem to be the unacceptably fixed roles of women, to be exposed in the next stanza.

What triggers this desire for destabilization is the contrasting freedom of the trees, which makes them "truer than women" — in the arboreal world, Plath suggests, fertility is effortless, the transient (those footless winds) can be tasted without being binding (that is, the sensual has no punishable or otherwise limiting consequences). Granted, there is some compromising of freedom: the trees are grounded at the waist. Here, a dash; and here, the imagery becomes more complicated, but never uncontrolled. One way to read "waist-deep in history" is that history begins, for the trees and, by extension, for women in our culture, at the waist and below — at the sexual. This reading seems justified by the image we encounter upon entering the poem's final stanza: the image of Leda, whose place in mythology is guaranteed by the facts of her rape and of her being, as a result, the mother of another problematic archetypal woman, Helen of Troy — herself also associated with rape and, for many of the Trojans, with a certain bitchery, as the *Iliad* makes clear. If we wonder how we got to the subject of Leda, by the way, we have only to return to the line "waist-deep in history," which also implies a life from the waist up — whereupon the poet's eye is directed to the upper portion of the trees, i.e., the leaves, resembling many small

wings, by which the poet is then reminded of the many small feathers to the wings of, say, a swan — the guise, of course, in which Zeus descended upon Leda.

From here, the associations proceed smoothly: Leda is a famous mother; "O mother [of God]" is a common means of invoking another culturally prominent mother, the Virgin Mary. And, like Leda, Mary too gives birth to the child of a divinity, though the circumstances, we are told, are very different; Mary is not in any way associated with rape — hence, Virgin — but with having the good fortune to have been chosen as a vessel of God; Leda's situation might more accurately be called bad luck. But in juxtaposing the two women, Plath suggests that there is reason to consider them together, that together these two archetypal women tell a truth about women more generally throughout history and civilization — that they are alternately the victims of dominant male figures or are meant to show gratitude for the patronage of such figures; and that the ability to give birth is a dubious gift — it is in the giving of birth, after all, that Mary guarantees her transformation into the suffering, grieving *pietà*, suggested in Plath's question at line 14: "Who are these *pietàs*?" She means, I think, the trees; but she also means Mary, and perhaps Leda also; perhaps all women, ultimately.

The last line of the stanza seems, at first, to be the intended answer to the question — but it is in fact only a return to the context within which the poem has ostensibly taken place. If it seems a bit jarring, this is deliberate. It's the line in which the speaker, in a sense, jerks herself back into reality — as if, after dilating from an ordinary dawn into a meditation on women, she were reminding herself: "only dawn, remember, only trees." But something else is jarring about this line, and the answer again lies in the poem's form. From the irregularity of stanza one to the increased (but deliberately flawed) regularity of stanza two, we come to the first four lines of stanza three, and encounter complete regularity — an *abab* rhyming quatrain which also shows a syllabic regularity nowhere evident earlier in the poem: 8-6-8-6. The poem becomes most stable, most regular in terms of rhyme and meter, precisely when it is discussing two of the most cultur-

ally fixed and archetypal women in literature, in history, both. Plath's response is to reject all of it; the steady movement towards formal regularity parallels the steady narrowing of focus whose point, once understood, is unacceptable. Hence, the final line of the stanza (of the poem), which has no rhyme, which has no metrical affinity with any other line in the poem — in effect, the line shatters all the regularity that's been worked toward, even as the poet attains new vision and rejects all previously received notions of what, as a woman (and perhaps as a woman who is also a poet?), she is expected to be.

Patiently, meticulously won, this is hardly the erratic and rage-powered gesture of a woman out of control. Nor is the poem an irresponsibly random collection of images; rather, the images become the reliable map they should be. The form and its absence, meanwhile, are the means by which the poet skillfully constructs and modulates her argument. "Winter Trees" is, like all of Plath's best poems, proof that associative technique is a far different thing from what it has increasingly been confused with, namely, permission to write irresponsibly and self-indulgently in the name of late-millennium chaos; and that formal elements need not be confining — nor, however, are they immune to being abused (free-verse writers and New Formalists, respectively, take note). The mark of the great poet (of whatever school) is control — again, vision. Plath continues to be misunderstood by so many of her readers, and what gets lost is what so distinguishes her finest work — a clarity of vision by which the world is re-envisioned, a hard intelligence, and a courage of eye, that does not flinch.

WORDS

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes travelling
Off from the centre like horses.

The sap

Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,

A white skull,

Eaten by weedy greens.

Years later I

Encounter them on the road —

Words dry and riderless,

The indefatigable hoof-taps,

While

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars

Govern a life.

WORDS FOR THE RIDER

One of the distinguishing marks and persistent delights of many of the first-generation "confessional" poets lies in their bold and insistent use of metaphor. This is true of no one more than Sylvia Plath, whose own "Metaphors" earns its title by being simply a "list" of metaphors, or rather of metaphorical vehicles, since the poem withholds its actual "subject" (pregnancy) and thereby reminds us, as Emily Dickinson often does, that a metaphor without a tenor is, after all, a riddle.

While the shifting metaphors of "Metaphors" manage to convey ambivalent feelings (beginning with a slide from the uncomfortably large "wholes" of "An elephant, a ponderous house, / A melon strolling on two tendrils" to the lovely "parts" of "red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!"), the metaphorical strategies of other Plath poems take us into even more complex emotional territory. The metaphors are not random "decorations" that illuminate particular moments of the poem, but rather metaphorical systems, territories the poet enters, occupies, and claims. In the most complex poems, there is an intricate play among several systems, one spinning off another by association. "Medusa" is a good example: beginning, as Plath's poems often do, in the physical, it refers first to the jellyfish called medusas, only then to the mythical figure evoked by the title. But just as the poem begins to dip into classical and then Christian mythology, it returns to the jellyfish, whose tentacles suggest, in a single line, the "umbilicus" that once connected and the "Atlantic cable" that now connects the speaker to her mother. Once introduced, all of these elements continue to participate in an intricate metaphorical dance: the human relationship is central, but the metaphors extend the poem from the most biological to the most metaphysical, thereby connecting us to our most basic and exalted selves.

Occasionally, in Plath's work, language itself is seen as static. "The word, defining, muzzles," she says at the beginning of "Poems, Potatoes." But the effort of the work as a whole — and the central awareness behind it — is that language does nothing of the sort: it's only by narrowly "defining" that words restrict.

At their best, words — at least the words of poems — are remarkably active.

This is dramatically true in the poem that at least on one level purports to define language itself: "Words," one of Plath's last poems, suggests by its title that what follows will be a discussion of its subject in the manner of "Years," a poem with which it shares a number of metaphorical strategies. And the poem is indeed such a discussion, though it's an insistently dynamic one: its argument develops exclusively by a series of metaphors that shift and transform themselves so quickly that the process itself illustrates what words at their best can do.

This is apparent even in the title, which presents itself not only as a defining "subject," but also as something like its opposite — a presentation of some "Words" that are too relaxed to deserve a more formal title, in the tradition of "Lines Composed" or "Stanzas Written" — or, in Plath's own oeuvre, "Words for a Nursery." To read "Words" as merely "some words" instead of a statement about them is difficult, but informative: until the first line of the final stanza ("Words dry and riderless"), one can see the poem as grounded in (if not quite "about") axes cutting into trees in a forest. If no one would read the poem in quite this way, there is nonetheless a refusal to let the stuff of the poem be purely metaphorical: it is *the water, the rock, the road, the pool* that the poem presents, tantalizing us with referentiality, suggesting a single scene.

The initial metaphor of the poem omits the copulative, making its metaphorical equation by juxtaposition: the one-word line "Axes" sits under the one-word title, its single trochee already establishing the pattern of falling rhythm that will dominate the stanza: "Axes/After," "echoes!/Echoes travelling/Off from the centre like horses." The rhythm echoes the sound the words describe: like the "axe's sound" that "Delay[s] a moment after the axe's stroke" in Louise Bogan's "Old Countryside," the sound of the axe is accurately identified as coming "after" the stroke, but the process doesn't stop there for Plath: if words are like axes, their echoes travel like horses, with no implication that they will, like the echoes of ordinary sounds, fade soon — except, of course, for someone still in the place where the axe struck.

When we return to that place at the beginning of the second stanza, similes begin to spin within the central metaphor, leaving behind a significant amount of emotional residue: where axes struck, sap "Wells like tears, like the/Water striving/To re-establish its mirror/Over the rock//That drops and turns." The tears and the mirror put us in emotional territory; but if we ignore the tears, we can imagine that we're still in the forest, where the dropping of a stone into what is later revealed to be a pool might suggest the spreading of ripples, a movement similar to that of the travelling echoes.

That is not what the poem gives us, however: when the second stanza returns to the source of the echoes, the place the axe struck, it stays there, where there *is* no sound, no echo, no ripple. The contrast here — and the central tension of the poem — seems to me to be between words and the one who utters them (and/or experiences them), between poetry and the poet (and/or the reader). Except for the title and its recurrence in the last stanza, the poem is, like "Metaphors," primarily a series of metaphorical vehicles; but it's perhaps suggestive that the poem begins with "Words" and ends with "a life."

In contrast to the dynamic "words" of the first stanza, the section that begins with the second stanza is ultimately static, ending with the transformation, in the third stanza, of the rock into "A white skull,/Eaten by weedy greens." An earlier poem, "All the Dead Dears," similarly moves from a mirror to "an image loom[ing] under the fishpond surface/Where the daft father went down," and the figure of a drowned father occurs in subsequent poems as well. This is not to suggest a reductively biographical reading of the skull, but to note that there's an emotionally painful impediment to "mirroring," and that it seems to come from deep in the psyche. There's some movement here, and it follows from the stroke of the axe-words, which are at least trying to make something restorative happen. But the movement is frustrated, and the shift in rhythm echoes this: the "striving" lines are metrically ambiguous, but the section ends in iambs ("The rock/that drops and turns") that contrast with the echoing trochees and dactyls of the first stanza.

When the "words" return, mid-stanza but "Years later," they appear without an antecedent, so that it takes a back-stitch at the beginning of the next stanza to identify them. For one moment, the metaphorical systems of the two scenes come together: the words the speaker encounters "on the road" are "dry" (no more sap, no more water) and "riderless" (not, presumably, like the horses of the first stanza). The dynamic horse metaphor dominates, reminiscent of the horses in poems like "Ariel" and "Elm"; again the falling rhythm creates echoes, "indefatigable hoof-taps." But if the encountered horses are the earlier words of the poet herself, as of course they must on one level be, the excitement of the first stanza ("And the echoes!") has disappeared.

The final scene of the poem, still "years later," reprises the water metaphor of the second stanza, which now becomes a pool that finally can't be seen in merely physical terms: the metaphor turns surreal, as "From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars/Govern a life." "All the Dead Dears," cited above, refers to a "gross eating game" with "Stars grinding, crumb by crumb,/Our own grist down to its bony face." There's the skull again — and of course "Words" was written less than two weeks before Plath's death, which may be why many readers find it despairing. But stars are reflected in water in a number of Plath's poems ("Faun," "Crossing the Water"), suggesting that the water here may have succeeded in becoming a mirror as well. More likely and more importantly, if "fixed stars" rule our lives, it's significant that they do so from "the bottom of the pool," not from the highest sphere where astronomy (and astrology) once placed them. Darkness and depth inevitably suggest psychic depths, and Judith Kroll, in her book on Plath, offers some language from Jung that is resonant here: she cites both "The stars of thine own fate lie in thy breast" and "the way of the soul in search of its lost father . . . leads to the water, to the dark mirror that reposes at its bottom." If "Words" suggests and indeed creates the dynamic ability of language to echo beyond its initial utterance, it equally suggests the very serious business it has of helping us get to the "bottom of the pool" where the impediments to psychic wholeness lie.

"Words" was written just after "Kindness," a poem in which the memorable lines "The blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it" occur. It was followed, three days later, by "Contusion," where "In a pit of rock/The sea sucks obsessively," where, when "The sea slides back,/The mirrors are sheeted." If dynamic words finally failed Sylvia Plath herself, they left not only themselves behind, but also the record of an heroic effort to confront the stuff at the bottom of the psychic pool. The words, finally, are not only for the poet who wrote and rode them for a time, but also for us, for whom their powerful echoes continue to be heard.

FOR A WOMAN DEAD AT THIRTY (2)

In memory
you
go through that
door and go through that
door and go through that
door

cold
dark

and then the way
the sky is lightest
over water

this world lightened

as your words
opened into their third
star-darkness

BODY OF THE HOUR

To say, *the soul*

is like saying, *the clock*
lost its body and went on ticking.

Shadow-body, this one
who lived behind the bat-faced
bone of the pelvis

raised in the slicked-back hackle of blood . . .

To say, comfort me now in the hour
of my loss is

to be the hour, always.
To be Lord Almost.
Mother So-Close.

To be this time each time
you stop — put down the fork
or turn the page and look up:

The meadow in a lather of white
four-o'clocks, the birthmarked
butterfly moving

as if written — erased — written . . .

I remember once in this world
I was an absence,
like you. Like you.

SUMMER HEATS LIKE THE NEEDLE IN ITS CHOSEN SKIN

And hummingbirds flung into the air,
fistful of violet amphetamines —

The clear water of the sky
as it dusks.

The ground, the road tar, the rock,
as if they know fever, know
the mouth that keeps coming

to the belly —
wolf-mouth,

and the boy who shimmers out
on the balcony tonight blinking
strychnine and gold tracers,
passion vine

staring in the pool those blossoms
never come up from,
little humanities . . .

Let's go out in the desert and shoot things,
June boy says.

Let's tie up a dog on the freeway.

Watch
the lights trying to say *turn away*
burn away

to the stink of ethanol and piss.
As if mystery

was asking for it.

TWENTIETH CENTURY CHILDREN

We were born in the light
of the war of the Gargantuas.
We were born into the picture
as others might be born into the world,
with the bloom of a giant ape foot
over Tokyo, with the blink of
the Lizard Men in New York. Not God,
but the God-hairs brushing
close — and the fire
up first like a fat mutant
gold cicada
which had slept in the earth
on the secret installations.
We were bathed
in the glow of the beast
from 20,000 fathoms, the arctic
flash of calving ice,
our bright fur groomed
under a mother's tongue that clicked
like starlodes. We
were created in the image
of the image of the glazed
stare of God, its half-lives,
its dream kitchens of gold
flecked tile, its backyard
bottle trees and common wrens, its
driveway of blue cement, its
television, television
glitter on our faces, other
on our faces, other
falling on our beds, utter
dying we were the picture of,
an eye for an eye,
an eye for a mouth.

TWENTIETH CENTURY CHILDREN (5): BLOOD-KISSING

The boy in the girl's ear says, Kiss me until
you draw blood.

And she's the hot thorn on his lip.

Stars wince and swell and wet,
endless little cut-me's . . .

Through the night the great sponge of traffic,
the oozy distance, the radios, the malls,
the cat survivalists

living out of a hole in the library.
Someone

has to say it: Nail me
to you.

The girl has always loved like suicide.

And the kiss wants to
know, Am I deep enough —

Am I lord and cock-ring
and ruby hammer,

spike and sundering thing?

The black place in the skull saying
Infect me. Be not only *Other*,
but *It*.

The way desire is —
live rat sewed up inside us.

ANACONDA

An Anaconda lives happily, wrapped around the body of a man every night.

"Why don't you lie down straight like I do?" the man complains one day.

The Anaconda tells him that men are warmer than all the trees she knows. "Besides, I dream of whirlpools and rivers while I sleep."

"You'd be better off if you dreamed of being a canal" (the man only thinks this, because he wouldn't want to hurt the snake's feelings).

But he doesn't sleep well, and decides to buy a bed for the Anaconda.

Every morning the Anaconda wakes up with an aching back.

The poor man gives her massages and begs her to try to sleep alone, to think of him, he also needs sleep.

"But a snake has to sleep," says the Anaconda, crying. "A snake has to sleep. A snake has to sleep."

TREE

to Frederick De Armas

A man in love with a tree goes to live with him awhile before getting married.

"Now you no longer need to look for sunshine, or water, or food," his friends say.

Every night the man combs the tree's hair and then they sit down to tea with their friends, the planets and the closest stars.

Life and the environmental magazines tell their love story to the entire world.

But one day the man gets tired of the same faces of the sun, the moon and the stars.

Relatives, environmentalists and their best friends the stars come and ask him why he doesn't want to live with the tree anymore.

The man tells them that he is thinking of marrying a river, a cloud, or something more versatile.

translated by Delia Poey and Virgil Suarez

THE LIZARD UNDERNEATH

Under the thinking brain
that watches itself thinking
that thinks about what's good
to think and how,

under the limbic brain
that swells with sentiments
hot-blooded, mammalian,
that brings quick flashes
of color and memory
before it names a scent
like cinnamon or scat,
the brain that wants, doesn't
want and wants,

under it all comes something
from a leathery egg
cold-blooded, dreaming
scaly reptilian dreams
foraging, grooming, seeking
the sun with hard, clawed toes
and hooded eyes. Love it.
Fear it. It couldn't care.

BELLS

She gets up, goes to the telephone, lifts it and listens
for windchimes while standing in a patch of light.
Pours coffee and creams it to the color of a cat hair
floating in her cup. Smokes and douses her throat,
goes to the desk and writes ocean. And means ocean
or shoulders. Either way, she means what's wet.
Follows the sweat with the skin of her ribcage,
longs for a nap, slaps a stamp on a postcard and mails it.

She writes *fierce* and she sees a girl-child,
gingham bonnet hanging from a knot at the neck.
Writes *neck* and means the most beautiful neck.
Wanders to the bathroom and back, arranges her hair,
starts a prayer. She's breathing: clearly breathing,
so smokes, writes *ribcage* and means *belltower*
but the bell is broken: the clapper cracked like a legbone.
Writes *a red car* and stops it in the crosshairs

of a windowpane's lead, draws the shadow of her own head
and shapes it like a cloud shaped like a bell and hears it ringing.
She draws a tree and sees sticks like X's for eyes, sees sticks
and means trees, sees trees and adds more, an orchard
looking like a lot of legs, looking like crutches, crutches
under clouds looking like bells, so she stops
and measures how hot the floor feels with her feet,
can't feel her feet and wonders how she got these broken bones.

NEAR HALLOWEEN

Like a bad thought, someone else's
bad thought, it hangs
by the neck — stuffed jeans
and flannel shirt, the pillowcase head
grinning, before
it lops over.

Student neighborhood. Which
jubilant drunk hoisted this thing
last night, from porch to star-eyed gable,
a toast: all sadness in the world — ha!
all misery — ha! to you and you and damn you!
Below, the light of a car blurred
as it took the corner.

The body turns
because there's wind. It turns
because it has no weight. The face goes
up, then down again, a soft thud
against the clapboards. It could be
anyone up there. And the leaves — their
thousands fall into the street, yellow wet,
rimmed with dark.

Not that anything's eternal
or exactly like any other thing.

THE WAY THE DYING HEAR THINGS

The way the dying hear things, I don't know —
the nurse busy
with another patient, *now lift*
your other leg, voice too high,
vapid sweet.

Or at some roadside crash,
blood pools secretly
under the coat, the *are you*
all right?, urgent, polite. Is that
a serious question? Oh, to answer back! To
answer back. . . .

Everything must get
smaller to them, more stupid, more everything
it ever was. Once, in a lecture hall,
I watched the young professor lost, half-raging
unto the history of science stop
at radium, famous
bar of it in Curie's dresser drawer,
the dimmest corner lit until
in front of me, a student — middle-aged,
back-to-school, kids grown — sagged,
one shoulder slipping.

That's it. She
was gone. But *radium*, he kept saying, echo
and ghost. She must
have heard that, so much
poison and shine.

A day slips
through its needle, a toddler counts to seven.
Or flies *tap tap* in October, caught
between window and screen. The ear
isn't a flower though a poet might say so,
little hairs straight up

then leaning as any flower would
toward light.

How dark in there. Down
the twisted canal go all sounds equal,
the swearing which ends soft
as prayer by the bed,
shit, dear god
damn it.

WILD HARVESTS

Gathering from what happened
to come: this is farming
like a gray squirrel,
scattering more
than it reaps, the silver
dust of *monarda* — the bronze
kernels of Indian grass.

What you thought
you planted here in spring
climbs up through
the brush pile
there: a note
for a dead friend's son, morels
on old debts
in the bottom drawer.

Regardless of your deed
to acres, it all comes
around corners of winters
when your
hands fall from stems,
coma of milkweed
escaping you, over the field
on years of wind.

After seasons of cultivation,
the hayfield spotty with alfalfa,
the orchard grass sulking
over the broken disk —
your lover turns back
to you, the covey
explodes around your ankles.

You wind down,
into the ravine,
to seeps of red oak
tea pooled in hoof-prints,
where once
your people drank;
you step through,
under a low branch,
see the face you know.

JUMP

Sundays. Sun-narrowed eyes. My father
in the leaky rowboat unties the frayed rope
from its peg, raises his arm from the oar
he steadies and holds out his hand. My job
is to bail out the water when the dinghy leaks.
One foot in the boat, one foot on the dock:
the lake quickly widens under my crotch.
When he cries *Jump*, I jump, and fall in.

I've narrowed the distance, reach for him
now in his vagueness, honey on his tongue
and the songs of Zion. What did he know
about this hot wind breathing down my neck
like the future — stripping the sand from the desert.
A bright face blown off. Out there in the light
as far as my eyes can see there is only
what's happened.

If I could scoop out the water
with my small can. I am filled with intentions.
My father says *Jump*. When I get to one side
what I want most is on the other.

Seattle — Jerusalem

THE FALL

The carpet tilted like the sea.
And she who never walked on water
tipped, spun, then toppled —

a bundle of sticks,
Pinocchio's old mother
come apart in her strings.

The way I watched
you'd think it was Channel 8,
another trick at the Olympics —

another triple lutz gone wrong,
except she didn't get up
to do it again, smiling stupid

for the judges. No judges.
Only me in the mirror, ticking off
in a ledger how once again

I failed to rescue her in time
the way she taught me,
the way she always taught me

how to love her love her,
little girl imperious or flailing
arthritic in my arms.

Now she sits in a chair.
The slinged arm prophetic as albatross,
heavy as the cast of her 91 years

hanging from both our necks —
her Purple Heart, her Olympic gold.
My alloy dipped in gilt.

Funny how things break down,
like when wires cross in the phone
and the conversation you bargained for —

the one life you sunned
and watered like a petunia —
splits into two.

Today we share an orange.
I strip it with my nail. The navel,
a hard wet knot under the skin.

Old Gray Bird — please,
today let's embrace the augury
of peel, fallen unbroken to the dish.

No more bulletins from the interior,
the study of entrails, the ominous
baww baww of the failed bowel.

I know I know: The fall
that will end it — hip or spine.
Any day now you remind me.

Mother, not to worry.
The short straw you've longed for
is in your hand at last.

This time you might succeed.
I have a talent for failure.
I've been practicing it all my life.

LOST IN SPACE

from a sculpture by Henry Moore

How turned in
these women are, complete
in their big bronze lives.
Even the reclining one, knob for head
and no delineations — no nose,
no nipples, no sunshine slot. No limbs
reaching from the body, no wild music
pinging in her thigh. Nothing but a hole
big as a fist drilled through her chest.
Yet how complacent, ho-hum she is
to that gap being there, surrounded by
a flesh polished to a bronze Pacific
that can't remember a time the hole
was ever filled, with fire maybe or gristle
or a daisy as simple as a heart.

Today the museum is filled
with mistakes. Even the information plaques
are wrong. Euterpe for Terpsichore.
One muse taken for the other.
The one who danced, lost
like the dance itself, fallen through
and forgotten, there being no plug,
no thumb in the dike big enough to hold it.

It's easy to play bloodhound
when something is left — a dirty sock,
two sneakers kicked off under a desk,
a whiff of pencil shavings, and the child
is home once more doing her algebra
before the telephone call
and the calendar page never to be turned again.

But a hole with no stopper
is a tub of everything that matters
running out, a perpetual wash of thoroughness.
The grand design of flush and swirl.
Might as well tickle a dead body
as ask a woman with a lobotomy in her chest
to remember where the dazzle went
or the lost dance in which to find it.

INFANTA

For a moment it flashed
through me, I thought I
remembered being someone before now,
the her who was me
hurt, felt,
embedded like a whorl in wood.
The photograph is black and white,
but I know the dress was amber —
she bells out toward me,
her fingers resting against
a cage of satin,
she stands the way I do
already — is that it —
or have I never forgotten how
to stand like her?

If I could just take the fire with me
into the next room I might sleep
and stumble into the black hole
of that photographer's studio,
back into the frame,
a wax doll, head and hands
emerging out of her costume,
like the infanta of Velasquez,
her future already in place,
maids-in-waiting, a dog, the dwarf,
everyone staring into a dream so dense
nothing ever escapes it.

STAY UP WITH ME

Because I don't want to sleep,
stay up with me,

but if you do sleep
go back to where you were before,
it will be familiar.

If knowing is being in a past tense,
a present that is, *was*,
a present that *is* goes back.
Isn't that how I know what I know,
by having been what I was?

Relativity incarnate —
any day now
I'll explode into night
like a star.
Stay up with me,

that's how I'll know what I was —
seen by something, watched,

slipping between intervals of the visible,
a morning snagged in its shadows,
hooked on a breath,

fire coming from the east,
a premonition,
light branding the floor, call it sun —
spells, divination by shadow,
salt, dice, dreams, ink,

the dough of cakes, corpses,
stay up with me —
when the furniture burns,
even I know how brilliant
the idea behind everything is.

BACKWASH

Bad times, and I go back in my mind
to the rail of the drawbridge spanning
Barnegat Bay, the distant sails
flaring in wind, mackerel sky,
white caps above and below. And play
this back one more time: the boy
who gassed up yachts at the boat basin,
how he'd saunter in to the snack bar,
karate chop the juke box and watch
the disk gently clatter down. *Louie,*
Louie. Cut to my sister the waitress,
covering her ears, yelling, "Get out,"
while he stares from behind one greased
dangling curl, refusing to budge,
sullen look, positively poured into his jeans.
Who says there's just one safe way to walk,
one road properly lit, and the rest —
all slippery water, unmarked? Who knows
what I was doing up there
on the bridge's slow rise, the concrete
rail's scuffed glitter, wind's sweet
bantering torque? Ask my sister why
she ran out screaming, tugged so hard
I had to roll her way, or plunge
to the stone embankment the tide bared.
She shoved me at a chair, dialed mother,
but I didn't hear what she said, I just
stared so hard I *was* that boy
gunning engines straight toward the slip,
so hard he's still inside me now,
slamming them into reverse just as the yachts
would have splintered against the dock.
No expression on his pocked face,
everything he felt poured into throttle and gas.
Boat, backwash, bridge, channel cut
deep as thought no flashlight can pierce.

And underneath? Who says it's all jelly fish,
tar, sharks, storm tide ripping things
out to sea? *Oh, Louie, Louie*, there are times
I go back to those whitecaps ruffling the sky,
that light streaking the steel-colored bay below.
No money, bad dreams, and the moon
come so close I can see the worry written
all over its face, big shock of some new loss
up ahead. I need a little edge, a glare,
that first splintering sound of dock
starting to give. Play it back one more time:
sputtering smell of gas, sunlit backwash
swamping the boat, the pier — all of which,
in that fine moment unlike most, the boy
utterly owned, and the boy shared with me.

SWEENEY AT PRAYER

“. . . he was filled with a restless tottering unquiet
and with a disgust for the places that he knew and
with a desire to be where he never was, . . . from
the curse of Ronan bird-quick in craze and madness
from the battle.”

At Swim Two Birds, Flann O'Brien

Why Sweeney haunts me while I wait outside
the ICU has something to do with wind-blown
pigeons on the sill, the family gathered
in one house, filling every bed, and snow
falling for days, blustery winds, sleet on glass.

Sweeney, who couldn't keep his battles
to himself, or wait for the appointed time,
but had to spear chuck the priest's cleric —
till din of battle or Father Ronan's curse
drove him to the woods in skittish fright,

all stumble and thrash, lurching into liftoff,
huffing himself up like a lumpy dove.
Down here, the bypass surgeon tells the truth
when he says he'll do some damage.
Face blackened, body pierced with tubes,

her monitors pulse, but no mother's there,
she's flown off, roosting somewhere in the room,
and no one knows how soon she'll come back,
if she's strong enough to press against
whatever rubs out kings and aging women,

those nettles within and without, divided
loyalties, mental unmoorings. It's enough
to drive anyone out into scruffy boughs
to groan and grieve like mad Sweeney,
who for all his gripes, still in song after song

loves grouse, gull, stag cry, and every kind
of tree — except the human family's.
In her room we coo, smooth pillows,
hover helpless against this violent cure.
Did they operate with bats and chains?

She's broken enough, impossible to lure
back from her woods. Rub forehead or hand,
and her lids flutter, but she flits off again,
refusing to land, another Sweeney, wanting
howl more than hush, bird more than church bell.

And did his fall make him holy, going out too far
on a limb till it buckled and chucked him
to the ground, giving what reason didn't?
There are prayers it's a terror to say,
it's snow hurl, wind bite, ice dam on roof,

plaster and sky howling down, as if you
had begged: make my mistakes worse,
prayers you say bent over with your face
in your hands, feeling the cheekbones, knuckles
and knees you will one day become,

lice-ridden prayers, nothing to do with
what you wanted, with *sorry* or *please* —
they clabber the mouth with nettles,
with longing and muck, hurling you
heart-sore and hoarse into the flimsiest trees.

THE RETURN OF FUGITIVE RED

You brought a vertiginous tilt
to the room with that smile.
Something told me, put down your pencil,
this is it.

I gave up
your whole Aristotelian system
in less than a minute.
Here, take your letters, too.

When color came back
it snapped on somewhere else,
following all the laws of motion
observed by falling rocks.
My stars, I put the moves on

Tycho Brahe, who squinted at comets
long enough to see the superlunar
world was more alive
than anyone wanted.
Once that star exploded in Cassiopeia
we were onto something big.

Watch closely, correct for arc-seconds.
Now you sleep with a woman who keeps a gun
under her pillow.
I cut my hair different.
A wooly bear is starting across
the warm asphalt
no matter what we've said
about the heroic tradition.

THE ENTHYMEME IN PERSPECTIVE

Socrates was a man.
We know. We know
he drank the bitter cup and complained
only of cold feet, preparing to be
received by his beloved geometry.

We were all sitting there,
hands on the table in duplicate tents,
when the door blew in.

It was the rogue police,
cordoning off the area with orange tape.
They looked wildly around
and lip-synched the TV.

We have a writ!
It seemed such a dignified
death was no longer legal in this province.

My worst fear was that someone would think of
disco, but it never came to that.

They dusted his fingers for evidence,
plugged a seismograph into each orifice.

In the corner a small yellow bird with no guarantee
was singing beautifully of the life of Socrates.
The cop with the squamous face
went to make the arrest,
but the bird slipped off its feathers
and vanished, transforming the cop
to a Buddhist monk and every weapon
in the room to a pine bough.

Really, no one was surprised,
for didn't we all know the truth?

Socrates was a man.
This made him mortal.

But what of us, we then began to wonder.
What would become of us?

FINDING VAUDEVILLE

There is a seam to cleave
the doctor's model heart.
The halves turtle my palms

inventing homeland as they go,
gaining shape only in their sinking
as ships that keel fingers.

This crew crypts
vast amounts of your hair, removing
pins & bobbins, or regrooming
the armors of medieval rhinos.

I function in the calms,
finding that vaudeville
amounts to old gardens
folded in stick & leaf, cane & ear
for the tempts & traditional ballads
of solicitors: *Here's your craving, fill it.*

& spelling
something close to your name
keeps ventricles empty
moments meant to be empty.

We read remains of foam,
where what is written
hisses, in turns mistaken for snake
then radiator then dissatisfaction

when, all along,
it was blessing nearby
disguised as grass.

GRANDMOTHER'S

Jars, ready for future fruits,
are inadvertent bells
to her side effects:

medicines smudge her tongue,

colors
of an aftermath
of small hunts —

thumb-stamped pests
in cupboards & dry goods.

wind drops apples

cherries crumple into themselves

beets root

*two cities grow
on either side of her
bringing infamy
in from the ditches*

*new birds from Japan
who roost her decoy bed*

She needs time to feed
her infant girl, needs to find
a nipple
among the judgment grass

resorting, finally, to a finger
held to the mouth
of the nothing she cradles.

ELEGY FOR SCOTT LIVING IN NYC

The next time
 we did it again. Gentle

yellow. In New York state
 the leaves turning.

Once left behind last season's
 rack of shirts —

once left. Unanswered.
 The phone and its ringing.

We haven't figured
 nothing out. The moon and

her whining. On my way
 to see you. Water.

It's like this. One season passing
 before we each can say

don't drink it. We use salt
 and sand to stop traffic,

we map the principal rivers
 of the world, the trees

in our backyard because
 there is always someone

we love. So repeat the color.
 Repeat the falling. Once is

never. Enough. There is always
 someone we love. Torn again.

Because what we all try
 never to say is.

SUCCESSION

In winter we need
more sleep. It takes 5 years
just to tie our shoes — how do we
expect to change evolution —
artificial light doesn't
make 4:30 any lighter.
More darkness means
more sleep, means roads
unsafe for biking. There are several
ways to express *to become*.
The best we can do is follow
directions: Dry wash your hair
in salt when camping or distrustful
of dishes piled in shower.
Bring eggs to room
temperature by soaking
10 minutes in warm water. We spend
2 hours a day feeling guilty. Our
small way of saying: I believe
there's something permanent, or, at least
semi-permanent. After seeing pictures
of the preserved, interred,
uninterred Eva Perón
I'm ready to believe anything.
Dragonflies last forever. So does
my 8-hour lipstick. Trash
buried under earth. We need
to be near our mistakes. That's
why people want to move back
to Love Canal. We know better
but can't help it. My friend dyes and
redyes her hair but still can't
get a platinum as bright as
a woman's dead 40 years.
In order to see meaning we must

see an underlying system.

In other words: our mothers
didn't dress us in plaid bellbottoms
to embarrass us. Most of the players
who opposed Jackie Robinson
now lie about striking.

Nothing we do is complete —
through imperfect tenses we
talk about the past without
mentioning an ending.

In summer, many days
we walked along the lake
talking, talking.

THE HOUSE ACROSS THE STREET

She called me Victor, which is wrong.
We were skating, and behind the pond's walls
I was aware of large observant animals.
We were sweating in the cold;
I was almost faint from reluctance.
Perhaps an older girl wittily insulted
the young, tuxedo-clad waiter,
and there was much Strauss and much Strauss unmerited,
just as she was pale and dark mouthed, and was she not also a
 young lady
who, now that it is afterwards, calls me Victor,
which is certainly not my name?
Now look how I can skate in and out among the buffaloes
and wear evening clothes! I am getting
a little older. However I love the music,
and the house across the street
is trying to climb in through my window.

WAREHOUSE

Not one car is parked in the silence
around this uninformative structure.
In the cold weather it squats and looms
at the southeast brink of the city. Its signs,
Acme Ring Shop, Mario's,
are newly papered over,
and I know there are no locks because I tried the door.
This building — I don't know that it is empty —
it seems utterly empty — has been in my thoughts
day and night.
Up black stairs past bruised white-washed stone walls
every door is unlocked and around the last landing
I think I hear bees swarming in the cold.

Michele Bowman

LETTER, POSSIBILITY

for Jeff

copper

today the forecast came by mail

all day long you'll have good luck

glancing just below the surface
of the day's skin you begin to verdigris

I forget you

then I call you to me and you come
softly fit in the slot of my palm

and all morning long
in threat of rain I hold
potential heat with mine

tea

the black spider is making a nest and in the afternoon we watch

or is it a mouse you say

you have given me something crazy and under the kitchen table
my legs begin crying together

my cup chatters to the saucer I no longer own

yes I say to my cup of wild pekoe

bring the rest of Xiangtan down to me

cotton

if you take the white fields
by dusk it is best

let the maps curl their fingers
alone — fall is waiting

if you leave to find it

roll the silence of the windows
down and cross ten rivers

when your clothes
begin tugging calling sadly
toward the mother fields

let go of your weather for
inside your skin there's

still hunger
still sleep

and a time for the warmth of both

cheese

can you see the black mouse in his hole?

today he is angry for the mail will not come
and the dancers have torn up the lawn again

no soft paper for the nest

no tail thumping to the beat

he turns a black eye to the wall
sees his children's last dinner
together

match

all evening the smell of fall trying
to burn itself into the south

the edge of something

the small twist at the core

again I take out the thought of you
turn it in my palm without looking as
a wind from the west
lifts my hem just enough

I'm still breathing
when I strike it

paper

at dawn the train
calls but I've said no

things to do
things to do

twist the curtains into hooks
open the skylight climb
out of the flowered planet

I forget the bag
of evidence tied with blue thread

but I've kept a few things
in a book of days and dreams

when I reach the station I tear
a page from it

I make it yours

JOHNNY HODGES DEATHBED BLUES

It must be the woman there
threading across his hands.
It must be her passage
baffling soft into throat
a question he asks —

Those shoes (What color? Black, white, two-tone?)
shined to a gloss where
anybody could see a face, world
skinning across. That was *swank*.
The in-between of knowing who was there
and pull of the look, over at her —
Sheer interval.

COLTRANE'S FLUTE

An instrument that does not
open a second mouth, bell.
That does not mount
a chamber, rise in a stair
before you. That does not
hang ready for all hands —
pearl of thumb, sly curve
of hook. That is called
transverse — it crosses,
borders, you sway where
it holds you. No mouthpiece —
only bare hole for barest
touch: lips, tongue, breath.
From it an air column escapes
and is not retained inside the bore —
at the head-joint, where the tone
is produced, it divides itself.
Before a mirror, it fogs
the glass (a cloud between
your eyes) if you blow it right.
It requires not *da* or *di* but *tu*.
When you let it speak
it is saying back: *you, you*.
It makes the biggest sound
from the smallest orifice —
asks you to sneer above it,
wear a mask with a needle
in your mouth so when Alice
sits down to the harp
(last days in June, at Huntington —
windows open, the leaning pines
breezed in remains of Rashied's prayer. . . .)
something very gently
threads through your body. Something
parting across itself
where your mouth
sews together your lips.

BY RYAN'S POND

All day wishing the skin off
that face. Mother's husband,

haunching in the cray,
barbs a sorry perch, inches

from the crib. The pink sieve

like a sleep on my small brother's eyes.
And when the pike leaps,

its grimed teeth lashing like a chain.
As my sandwich, its mayonnaise,

drums up the flies.

STABLE

Not Mary, but near
and darker than the throat
of Bethlehem.

Outside, she watches
a small winged beast
sit, unfluttering
on the ash-bough.

It is white. White
with black rings,
and come so far
in its camouflage.

The child breaks.

She hears it.

And takes
back the blood-pail,
full of milk.

THE GREY MAN'S DANCE

In his room the dirty moon
splashes on the buckle. How
the leather is frayed, is blackened.

Elisha sits ravelled in the uncolored
corner. *No dead will walk
with my heart's bone.*

Hallelujahs of smoke
pain their way through the blinds.
O lost moon, O street . . .

Where Elisha has stood and held
the low night. Opening blisters,
silence filling his socks.

With his belt so tight and the moon
like a foal. *But its light still sways
the pines' down shadows.*

Meeting no one, nothing,
just gravel shaped as dice. Which
Elisha kept kicking to nowhere.

ETCHING OF A SMALL TOWN

Get out of here, I'm telling you, get out,
this isn't a tavern reeking of garlic
with some bartender's railed counter, where
you can tear every poster off the wall and ogle
at weevils. Take a good look around,
everything's where it belongs: the brass doorhandle,
the brass tap, the brass mortar, and you could even
find room for the screams of feeble animals.
And the clock! The cuckoo-clock! It throbs
as if the mayor's heart had been laid out
on parade. . . . Get out, I'm telling you, get out.
Even your breathing's monitored,
as though you were in intensive care.
Should you shout just once, just once talk about
the multiplying, red spiders
so someone might overhear, or about
the dogs devouring the guest flesh, your linen shirt
will be snatched, your mouth stuffed with clouds,
feathers of swans, and you'll turn blue with them,
like the worm-eaten June plums.
Are you writhing? Are you twitching? Some
of your sheriff's deputy-henchmen might still be in town
to strap you into the straitjacket sprinkled with eau de Cologne.
Get out of here, I'm telling you, get out.
The sweet scent of geraniums is too intense.

I, TOO, MIGHT HAVE BEEN

I, too, might have been a drunken,
dirty frontline soldier: a rum hero whirling
his arms and aimlessly shooting, a rum soldier,
death's close friend, who walks around
in a cocked helmet and tickles with his bayonet
the stomachs of curled-up hedgehogs and trembling women,
then skewers the quince-apple
so he, too, has a Moon.

Everything was set for it: sky, earth,
draft call, lustful drumbeat, the endless
roads were set. The newest dictionary
of the dead, in which lie several
words for bone and lost eye.
Mother-cry in the darkened house
was set, too, there where the warm biscuits
and hot spoons would have started out
towards the snow-fields every night.

Even now I hear the clattering
of trains racing in flames,
the huge, palm-sized wounds crawling through
the forest, still looking for me
from tree to tree. Where did I fall behind?
Where behind the lice: those orderlies
of the perfect, little death?

Was an angel watching over me? Was it the scabies-
infected nurse or pampered Blind Fate?
Or someone among the perishing gods,
who secretly closed every door on me
and arrayed me in bell-peal?
The bell's still ringing, ringing in me,
but I can't stop dreaming about rooms grown sooty,
and fluttering bloody geese caught in cannon fire.

translated by Len Roberts and Maria Szende

NONSENSE

Stars. Jean pluck stars from sky, name them
for herself. They live under bed. White coals.
Sugar cubes. Lock Ness Monster
Mother she hide deep. Too tired to chop wood
and hack berry smoke burn the nose. Only pecan crackle-crackle
right but that stack run out
when Old Orchard Jesse stop jumping rope with Mama.
She say *Charcoal burn fine, now set the table quick!*
No matter no dinner is coming.

Lock Ness Mother she gray all day, bloom mushrooms
in basement — *don't touch*
those bald babies — snow caps could melt some nights
Mama drip thick mud tears, let Jean
lick them up before pushing her away.
Jean climb chair to see plum-blue mum
growing on her back. It last two weeks
but Jesse's tattoo stay and stay.
How'd you do that? Mama ask Jean.

Free lunch at school. Sit at separate table.
Nice teacher drop sugar cubes
in Jean's pocket, say, *Don't be ashamed.*
What's red-and-white-and-black all over?
Granny tell Jean come live with her once she learn
to sit still and stop talking nonsense.
On nice mornings Mama remember
recipe for goulash.
Spoons droolin', voices singin' — Mama's low
and bony, Jean's light, like leaves.
Stay home from school. Eat goulash all day.

Jean say she gonna have street named after her.
No, no, not nice to catch someone in a lie

so Mama stop looking. Hide deep.

*But no one's all bad, she say. Your dad
knew how to lift a woman into the clouds.*

Clouds. Stars. *Do me! do me!* shout Jean
but Mama turn away. Drink

hiccup water late. Too tired to chop wood.

REGARDING JEAN'S DECISION NOT TO
RECONSTRUCT HER BREASTS

She can ignore the unshoveled snow on the sidewalk;
eventually the problem will solve itself.

Yet those two valleys steam-shoveled
out of her chest . . . if breasts could regenerate,

like the velvet lining of the uterus, then fine.
But no more days lost to ether and morphine, no more

dreams of buckskinned, coon-capped
surgeons panning for gold, sieve and picks

poised above her body — not even to placate
her family, her friends, eager for restoration.

Besides, she prefers the word *disfigured* to *prosthesis*,
not a lovely sound no matter how you say it.

Disfigured reminds her of skaters sewing swaths
of figure-eights, and the wine bottle shape

they take for their fast, orgasmic spins,
breasts scarcely larger than hers.

Listen, she wants to shout,
death lusts for me, big tits or not.

I wear this patch-work flesh
like war medals on a lapel. I roam

the Chicago Institute of Art, at home among
the cross-hatched cubist figures.

And when I come to that painting by Pierre Bonnard —
not his usual nude but two plump, honey-skinned

apples placed side-by-side on a plate — I ask
if that, alone, makes them breasts.

DECK OF CARDS

I can't hear you, my husband
says. "I can't understand the words
coming out of your mouth."
Are you crazy, I am saying
to him. Shopping, the clothes
smell of bleach, colors sorted out,
a hot steering wheel. I guess desire is
my goal. At the casino, Kewadin, *What are
You Kewadin For*, the gamblers
are women and the women are depressed
from ages five through ninety-five.
There are women in wheelchairs
and bonnets and there is a woman in
a wedding dress, crackling. There's
breath, pink wine at the slot machines.
Their husbands are pineapples. Their
fingernails are rind. Let's go home, I
say. Good luck on the ace, he says.
Swallow, and reach. That's all we do
these days. Share a bathroom.
Get rid of an infection. Radiance?
I was thinking sunshine and eggplant,
I was thinking sand, dust, ocean, elapsing.
A small brown and white dog there,
maybe in the middle of a clean sweep.

BEGIN

Pacing around my house and grabbing chip
and saying *chip*, floating it over light and under light,
sticking it into my other hand. Other hand doesn't eat it.
Try wall but wall doesn't open up and swallow chip.
I say *wall* and lay one flat hand against and I get swallowed in.
Holding onto chip, rough knifing it, slicing my way out.
Chip snaps in half. I say *dark* and name it *dark*.
I'm whispering to my wife who lives inside the movie screen
that's trying to kiss the movie screen I'm swallowed in
when there's no need for whispering. Something rings and I
name it *phone rings* but not out loud which would be a whole
phrase of me naming things. One of my students hears me
whispering so now I know my voice doesn't live in my elbow,
or leak through my knees, or peck its way out through my ribs
because I've tried all that. And either I'm silent and he's
hearing me think, or I'm whispering, so let's call it *whispering*.
"Were you sleeping," he asks? *No, just whispering*.
"I leave your class and your whispering
doesn't add up to anything for me," but he's not saying that.
"I'm naming things too," he says but he's not whispering.
I'm inside the wall with the phone line leading inside
my movie screen naming things and shimmering.
My wife's movie screen is rubbing its belly against
my movie screen, and I'm listening to her naming things
and him naming things and no one at all is whispering.
"When I leave your house," student is saying in hard language,
ball peen, "I'm on fire." Now I'm checking my —
I'll call them — *arms* for fire, and pushing them through
the movie screen. "I leave your house and even God's lips
at the end of your street can't blow my fire out," student says
while I'm whispering *earth* and *dirt* and *concrete*,
and things — they're appearing below his feet,
so he's not falling while I'm whispering.

CUBAN WALK

All this practice and suddenly I love
to rumba, slammed up together drunk
at weddings, how our hips and shoulders clap:
slow, quick quick, slow. All this crushing of her
right foot with my left, scuffing her best pumps
as we curve the box. All these steps we miss
on the underarm turn. All I can do
to keep the beat, to hold, side together, hold
as she whispers *The Girl from Ipanema*
against my boutonniere. All the way to
Ellis Island, Mamacita and Papito
walked this Cuban Walk. All these forty years
to shake my shame of two bodies pressed
close, dancing. Lord, let me live this life.

TESTAMENT

I broke it off afraid of him, the farmhouse
they shared, imagined her old love
finding her naked after a shower, the accidental
slip of towel off breasts. The TV's
intimate glow worried me, the popcorn bowl
warm between their hips, the spell
of his Teutonic gaze. Instead he held her frenzy
of tears to his shoulder, her starving
shrinking body. Instead he carried enchiladas
home to the woman who'd betrayed
him. All summer he tempted her only to eat,
and in this way kept her alive for me.

THE WOODS BEHIND THE HOUSE

A perfect day, we said, three mothers.
Sane air with its shard light.
Behind the house a diversion of slim trees the boys
wandered through playing hide-and-seek till one
came screaming from the inner-sleeve,
the farther circle of dense brush. It was my son
who'd never before made such sounds of terror,
his shirt dotted with stunned
yellow-jackets, welts
on his legs, throat, and chest. And how

could I think of death on a day like this?
Home from the hospital he rested with ice packs
while I got into bed. It was my own death
that seemed nearer now, not his:
nervous heart, babbling brook blood.
His younger brother beside me,
touching my hair. For now the pain was everywhere.
It moved through our roots, tree to tree,
a tree-shaped pain with its old, heady canopy,
its muscled trunk and a burrow below
where something rotten and hollow
was inner-lit and fiery
with crazed, yellow-streaked heralds.

CLARE VIEWS THE BODY OF FRANCIS

When Francis of Assisi was dying
Clare was so ill she thought she'd die first and be there

to greet him when he came to the next world.
But it was Francis who kept her here, ordering her to eat

a bit of bread each day, to keep the taste of this world
on her tongue. I go back to this story over and over.

Clare starving herself. Francis dying.
And as if they were my own

I want Francis to live. Like watching you on the phone now
the shape of your face changing for an instant

as it passes through you that your good friend
is dying, and you're helpless, thousands

of miles away. That's how I replayed
my brother's death for weeks, months,

as if it could be undone. How my parents
must have dreamed it, unable to close their eyes at night.

And I can't help wondering if Clare ever believed
she'd survive 30 years without Francis.

After he died the brothers carried him one last time
to San Damiano. They held him up

beneath the sisters' window. There were sounds
from beyond, like scratching or yelping, light came

loose and swarmed his corpse.

The men watched in awe at how the women wept,

Clare radiant above his empty body.

That's how you rise now from your chair,

rise to your grief, your shining eyes on me,

your hand pressing mine so I'm stunned by what I'm losing,

what I've lost, stunned by how we go on, still loving

and loved, standing here, consumed by light.

SHIPWRECK AND DRIFT

White utopia, windless nowhere, sail: you
Troy refusing to burn, the Rome
I never found. I foundered there. Gold
of the Hesperides, gold of the buried sun.
I'll tell you what difference means, wished into

recognizability, all equipoise, calm
luxury: chime, half-brother, dream
of mind. It's made you
what you are, locked store of hope, hoarded
money: violence, injustice, and a deferring

happy death. No strolling up and down
a certain street at four A.M. for you, no hoping
for a ride to anywhere from someone
who was only warming up his car. No
back room booths and glory holes at six.

But if you'd been there, you would have
been the man on every monitor, Technicolor
sex repeated in perspective, vanishing
there. When I got there, I looked
for you, I sang this out of tune. When I got out

there was no sun, but there was light. The sky
was pearl white, mourning-dove white, curdled-milk
-spilled-in-the-gutter white, but pearls and mourning
doves aren't white at all. Threatened
new weather, promise of rain, you

could have been anyone, and you were
willingly, half-smiling in the half-light
under a flowering tree that will never bear
fruit. Mock orange, mock plum, parahelion,
pareselene: it's true, nature loves to hide

itself. *I love the ground*
on where he goes, parched pavement
where it displays the darkness underneath,
worn words I've repeated already. Already
you're receding, half-visible at best, and that

only when I keep my eyes half-closed, my mind
half-open to suggestion. You're waving a torn
white flag, you surrender again. Little boat
taking on saltwater. *Wherever*
he has gone, I have gone. One life

for me, and one for someone who waits
and watches, watches and waits. We've known
each other too long, grey eyes, I'll tell you
what difference means. Black reeds`
part for white Ophelia too.

WHAT GETS DONE

*. . . they have been referred to as earthquake cottages, wood shanties,
camp cottages, earthquake memories. . . .*

— Lester Walker, *Tiny Houses*

1.

The plain sound of voices, no music so bare —
workmen next door
are talking, numbers drifting out of their mouths,
music made of lines and distances
as if the thing they plan to build or repair
is talking through them, clearly, carefully.
It awes me, what gets done,
how, hand and mouth, they'll hitch the undone to the done
the way a whistle pulls its train along.
And then, how soon what's made or fixed,
a chimney, say, goes mute
and rain and snow begin
without any hands
the niggling job of unrepair.

2.

One year the army built five thousand shacks,
fir and redwood, side to side
two dollars a month to rent one fragile
teacup, one earthquake
memory
until around them San Francisco
one brick at a time and block laid over block
could be stacked high and teetering again.
Until then,
fishing shanties, Sunday houses, bandboxes,
bolt-together houses, cluster sheds,
picnic houses, writing huts
and school-bus shelters made a city out of crowdedness:
metal chimneys, no side windows,

newspaper and burlap
covering the inside walls, clothes pegs on the walls
instead of closets,
wood or coal stove, chairs and a table, beds,
and, sometimes, rocking chairs.
Always there was the sound of somebody talking or whistling,
snoring, weeping, rocking
in the house next door, the house in back, the house in front —
houses built to creak and lurch along,
listening chairs
in which the body sits apart from light,
or shadow, or
what has been done to it, or what it has done
with metal or wood in its hands.

LUNAR ECLIPSE

for my brother and sister, visiting me in Cornwall

Tonight as the merest ghost of us
passes over the moon and washes its face
a dirty orange, we have to try and spot the instant of eclipse,
though some change moves at the speed of flowers, not of
something
counted into the hand, so maybe all we'll see
is all we ever see, what's happened
and is done with us,
bygones be bygones,
hands washed, period, end of the line,
a copper moon, then a dun moon, then a pumpkin moon,
fed up and sickly moons whose parent moon is still a mystery,
we the puzzled look on its face,
dead seas blind to our own faces,
deaf to what stone circles want to ask
an ancient smile drawn with a stick in the dust,
our breaths cartoon clouds wisping Earth,
where yellow streetlights are the dotted lines
that hold streets true to their course all night,
our voices one voice, high and low tones in the dark,
waking Marcus the pony at the fence, feet shuffling
to walk the long way back to sleep,
along the lane, beyond the glow of Carbis Bay, over the stars,
around Knill's monument and up the tors
where it will finally be black
whether our eyes are open or closed.

THE GREGOR SAMSA SYNDROME

My Nixon began when I did,
1960, the same summer marriage healed me,
Nixon's two-car caravan lost between Convention

Hall & his Chicago hotel
but only my arm's-length away & two changes
from president — Kafka would've made him

smaller but Nixon's limo metal refracted
him big — light sliding,
unable to hold on to the dark metal as his limo

cornered. I had to stoop to see in
past my window-reflection doubled
over his face, surprised by the Nixon nose

behind my own, the omnivorous
whiskersshadow that only tired when it reached

his eyes or the jowls knotted
off with a rep tie — not yet Nixon enough.
Not insect, peripheral to the analogy
but infected by it, I was a Stockyards
guard — I indicated to him the straps

that crossed my heart;
with the other hand I remember I showed
the way out of the Stockyards.
Behind me, the closed packing plant gate

so often spliced that it seemed to climb
itself wire by wire
into the twilight hazed like hairspray
above the soft, smog-bitten brick,

the zone of boarded factories —
Upton Sinclair's Chicago, relic & by then rat-Gehenna.
I pointed north where several Chicagos
overlapped between Nixon's nomination

& his downtown hotel.
The lost campaign guide car, a fender ahead, crunched
over bottle fragments
as Nixon left me, a skinny summer hire

in twill some earlier fat guard
had sweated piebald — my uniform collar
furred with abrasions
& so capacious that I could tuck my chin

in under the tie. Economics had moved
the slaughter closer to the animal-breeding Iowa
& Kansas farms, moved it so far

west that just years later it showed up
human in Da Nang & Hue.
The old meat-packing kill-rooms had no power,
though leftover electricity

still coated chutes, metal stairs & hatchways —
that whole summer I went
flashlit & scared, realizing that I was the only meat

in the half-dismantled plant & that the roaches
knew it. Handsful skittered
over one another when I would pop

a switch dismantlers had left in, & the bulb
might flash once, an aspirin
clouded by its own dissolve.
Sometimes that summer I'd be so lost

in those ghost wars,
the images of fat-knotted offal
steaming inside vats, the saved organs
still working the next world's foods that

I'd have to trot my rounds by flashlight
&, almost too late, fumble
my alarm key into the company sequence,
the next box & the next box,
my flashlight skimming bloodspots

in odd places: on a ceiling,
up one window grimed shut but poked
through the reinforcing mesh with ragged breath-holes.
I'd stumble, lost — no machines left

but bolt-holes in the floor, shafts open
under sawhorses. I'd stumble like a Stavrogin
arguing the missing steps to suicide —
the way my Nixon later died
guilty of forgiving himself, a kind

of suicide. Forgive me if I only pointed him
away from my war. Now I'm almost sixty,
chitinous & inarticulate but never Nixon's Virgil —
see, I'm not a Kafka, at most an exegete

of Keats-scraplets, little milagros, anthology lines
I once copied to quote myself

into my wife's love.

DARK BLUE

To write every night in the dark blue
book of grief. To write every.
Night. To write night,
its letters edged with half the shades

of dark blue in the blue
black span
of the milky spine
of the galaxy:

is this
the thought
the slick roads stipulate
at dusk when the clock skids back

and the sleet slides open
its clattering veils
and there is the sudden
dark blue

book of shining.

SPOON

No bowl but only the smallest
curve to scoop to
taste to grasp

with a glint of silver
still in the tarnish
as if a spoonful of sorrow

makes the sugar go
into the twittering leaves, the sky so
broken with streaks of fading

there must be a ladle
to lap it up, to lave
the bodies of trees and hills,

but no, there's only, there's
anyway, just this one
blackening spoon.

CALVADOS

Heat of the apple, soul
of the wish inspiriting
the tree, fall

of sweetness flaming
away: here's
maybe the final

ghost of full and ripe
in a lucky punctual
goblet, shining

naked to taste,
humming how now
in the garden the last

stalks yearn, last
briefs of color
claim and jostle

and won't give up.
But the tree so silent,
the picnic table sputtering out.

What strolls in the grove?
Go sit on the battered
chaise the former owner

left still warm.
Go sit and sip.
And listen.

Forget to weep.

TRUNK

There is what is
given and thick
and hardly knows
itself, knows only

down and *up* and knows
in the numbness
nothing more but
still and *yet*, and still, yet,

down and up,
the grip of the digging,
the slow accretion
into what might

still and yet
be light.

CONTRIBUTORS

MARIANNE BORUCH is a frequent contributor to these pages. Her most recent collection, **A Stick That Breaks and Breaks**, appeared last fall from Oberlin College Press. She teaches in the graduate writing program at Purdue University.

MICHELE BOWMAN attended college and law school at the University of Texas, then did an MFA in poetry at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, graduating last spring.

MARCUS CAFAGÑA's first book, **The Broken World**, was selected by Yusef Komunyakaa for the National Poetry Series and published by the University of Illinois Press in 1996.

KAREN CARCIA's recent work has appeared in *Salt Hill Journal*. She is currently a student in Western Michigan University's PhD in creative writing program.

IOANNA CARLSEN has published stories and poems in many magazines, including *Poetry*, *The Hudson Review* and *Nimrod*. She lives in New Mexico.

SANDOR CSOORI is Hungary's leading poet. His translators, LEN ROBERTS and

MARIA SZENDE published his **Selected Poems** with Copper Canyon Press in 1992.

RODNEY GOVE DENNIS is retired after many years as Curator of Manuscripts in Harvard's Houghton Library. He is the author of a chapbook: **Carolyn** (Harlequin Ink, 1996).

KAREN DONOVAN lives in Rhode Island and makes her living writing about engineering design software and information technology. Her first book, **Fugitive Red**, has been selected for the Juniper Prize and will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press next spring.

NANCY EIMERS is the author of two books of poetry, **Destroying Angel** (Wesleyan, 1991) and **No Moon** (Purdue, 1997). She teaches creative writing at Western Michigan University and Vermont College.

ERIC ELSHTAIN teaches composition to college freshmen in Denver, Colorado. His poetry has appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Faultline*, and other journals.

STEVE FAY's first book, **What Nature**, has just appeared from Northwestern University Press. This year he is Writer-in-Resi-

dence at Illinois Wesleyan University.

ALICE FRIMAN won the 1997 Ezra Pound Award from Truman State University for her forthcoming book, **Zoo**. She is also the author of **Inverted Fire** (BkMk Press, 1997).

JUAN CARLOS GALEANO was born in the Amazon region of Columbia and moved to the United States in 1983. He has translated contemporary writers like Charles Simic into Spanish, and is currently working on a collection of Amazonian folktales. He lives in Tallahassee, where he teaches Latin American Poetry and Hispanic cinema at Florida State. His translators, DELIA POEY and VIRGIL SUAREZ, are both colleagues of his at Florida State.

SANDRA M. GILBERT lives in Berkeley and teaches at U.C. Davis. Her latest books are **Ghost Volcano: Poems** (Norton, 1995) and **Wrongful Death: A Memoir** (Norton, 1995).

BECKIAN FRITZ GOLDBERG is the author of **Body Betrayer** (Cleveland State University, 1991) and **In the Badlands of Desire** (Cleveland State, 1993). She teaches at Arizona State University.

SHIRLEY KAUFMAN's most recent book is **Roots in the Air:**

New and Selected Poems (Copper Canyon, 1996).

BARBARA LAU's poetry has appeared in numerous magazines. She teaches Composition and African-American Literature at various colleges in the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, area.

ROBERT LEE writes: "I'm just beginning a year of post-graduate fellowship from the Michener Center for Writers." His poems have appeared in several magazines.

ANNE MARIE MACARI has appeared in various magazines, including *FIELD*. She is completing a manuscript of poems.

GERALD MAJER's poem in this issue are from a book manuscript, **IX Love**. He is also working on a sequence called **Plague Years**, and an interdisciplinary study, **Contagions: A Modern History**.

CARL PHILLIPS's most recent collection of poems is **From the Devotions** (Graywolf, 1998). He is teaching this year in the writing program at the University of Iowa.

JOHN RYBICKI works as a carpenter and teaches creative writing at Kalamazoo College and Interlochen Center for the Arts. His first book of poem, **Traveling at High Speeds**, was

published by New Issues Poetry Press.

CAITLIN SCOTT has an MA in creative writing from the University of Florida. Her poems have appeared in *Threepenny Review* and *Iris*. She works for the Center for Service and Learning at Oberlin College.

DENNIS SCHMITZ is the author of **About Night: Selected and New Poems**, from Oberlin College Press. He writes that he is currently in his final year of teaching at Sacramento State.

HEATHER SELLERS teaches English at Hope College, in Michigan. She is at work on a novel, a collection of stories, and a book of poems. Her poetry chapbook, **Your Whole Life**, appeared in 1994.

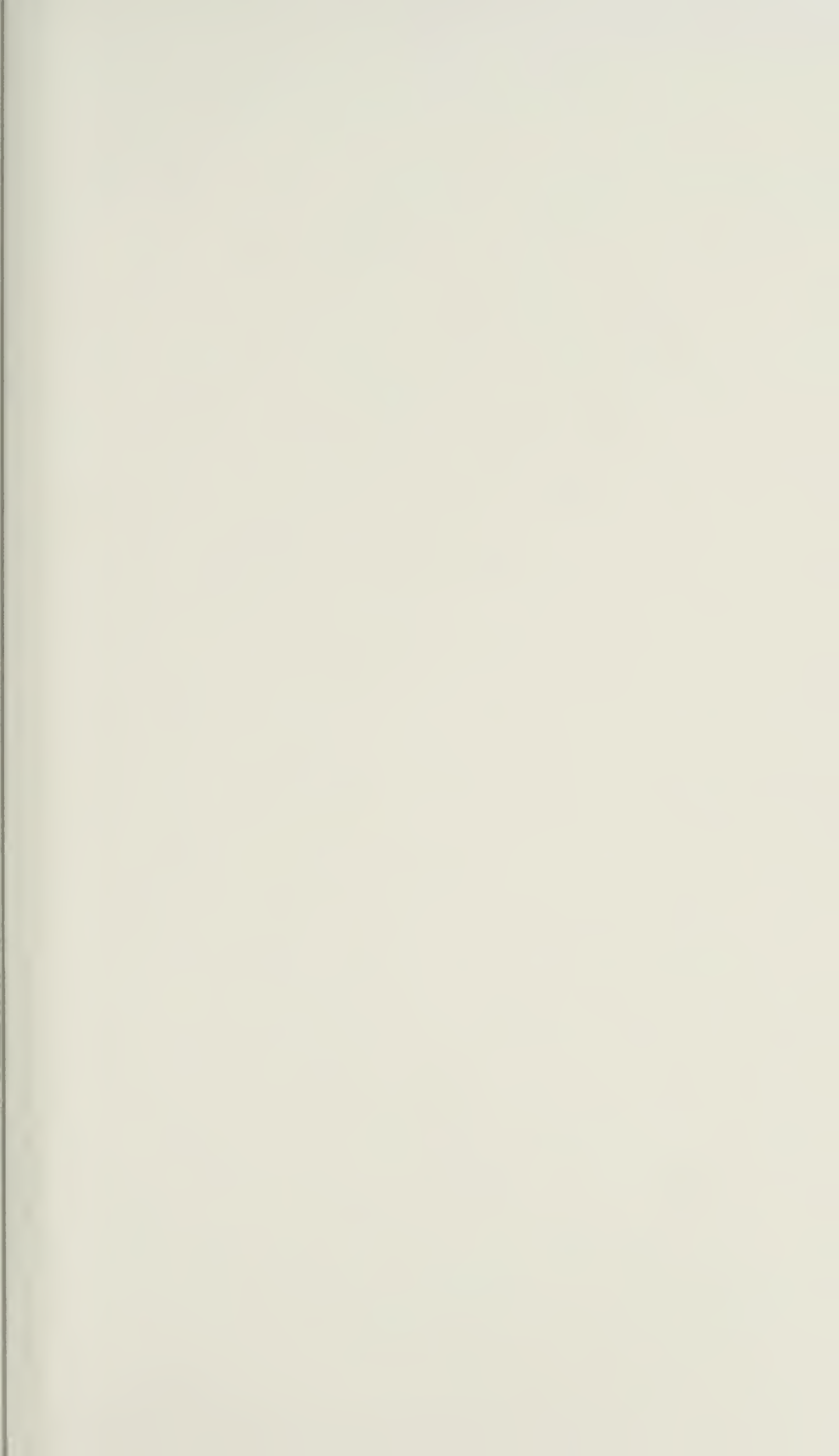
REGINALD SHEPHERD's books are **Angel**, **Interrupted** and

Some Are Drowning, both from University of Pittsburgh Press, which will also publish his third collection, **Wrong**, in 1999.

BETSY SHOLL's newest book, **Don't Explain**, appeared this year from the University of Wisconsin Press. She teaches at Vermont College and the University of Southern Maine

JEAN VALENTINE is the author of seven books of poetry, the latest of which is **Growing Darkness, Growing Light**. Her new book, **The Cradle of the Real Life**, will be published by Wesleyan. She lives and works in New York.

KARY WAYSON has an MFA from the University of Washington and lives in Seattle. She is working on her first book of poems and teaching poetry at the Richard Hugo House on a volunteer basis.



\$700

ISSN: 0015-0657

MATTHEW, 1965
PHOTOGRAPH BY KENNETH JOSEPHSON

March 7, 1983

Dear David,
I think this is
a magical moment
passed. Enjoy.

Kenneth Josephson

photofolio

David

© 1980 KENNETH JOSEPHSON
PRINTED BY RAPOPORT PRINTING CORP.
© FOTOFOLIO, BOX 661 CANAL STA., NY, NY 10013
KJ2